インテリビレッジの座敷童⑥

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

電撃文庫

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鎌池和馬 イラスト／真早

「はふう……朝風呂などと気取ったのが間違いでした……」

「さて、のぼせた雪女を介抱するため、俺はちょっとあっちで布団を敷かなくてはならなくなってしまった訳だが」

「酔わせて押し倒すなんて最低な野郎だねアンタ」

「何ですかーもー、ご主人様!!」

雪女（ゆきおんな）

夏が苦手な、見た目はロリ少女の致命誘発体ヤンデレ婚活妖怪。

サキュバス

屋根裏に棲み付いている悪魔。マイクロビキニの素敵な同居人。

猫又（ねこまた）

しっぽを触ろうとすると怒り出すが、比較的常識人（？）な妖怪。

陣内 忍（じんない しのぶ）

「インテリビレッジ」に住む、妖怪に好かれやすい体質の金髪高校生。

「忍クンはあれだよね、全体的に視線に遠慮がないよね」
「おーい、ナントカ渚ー」
「忍ちゃん、どうしたの？」
「えー、つまりこの場合の『うば』というのは……」
渚(なぎさ)
忍の幼なじみ。昔は普通だったが、今では立派なヤンデレに成長。
小手蜜 惑歌(こてみつ まどか)
忍の同級生。金融関係の才能があり、株取引などで資産を築いている。
谷岡(たにおか)
忍達の担任で、オドオド系メガネ教師。何故か赤ブルマを穿く羽目に。

「おおむかで、だって。
どんな妖怪なのかな。
やっぱり大きいゲジゲジみたいなのかな」
「大百足は、
悪い妖怪じゃないよ」
米咲 尋(よねさき ひろ)
唐傘お化けを雨よけに、提灯お化けを照明に使っている村の小学生。
蘭園 幸(らんぞの さち)
都会からやってきた小学生。
読モもやってるファッションリーダー。

内幕 隼(うちまく はやぶさ)
殺人事件などを扱う『一課』の刑事。真面目で熱血な常識人。
「もう!! 遅い遅い遅過ぎるって!」
八河 巴(はちかわ ともえ)
亡くなった父が刑事で、以前に隼に助けられたことのある中学生。
「とーもーえー……。私はそれよりアンタに聞きたい事がある」
「ええと、緊急の用件というのは具体的にどのようなものなんですか?」
菱神艶美(ひしがみ えんび)
『きな臭い事件現場』に何故か頻繁に出没する水着美少女。

祝(はふり)
百鬼夜行のリーダー。裏で暗躍していたが、いよいよ表舞台に登場。
「彼が今の私達に協力してくれるとは思いませんが」
「良いだろう」
病魔の使役者(びょうまのしえきしゃ)
百鬼夜行絡みの仕事も請け負う、疫病と呪いのエキスパートで、寡黙な仕事人。
「そうかね。案外、お嬢ちゃんがうるうる上目遣いでもやったら一発だと思うけど」
菱神 舞(ひしがみ まい)
艶美の姉で、何か危険な仕事をしているらしい、裏の仕事人。

「残念だったな、俺達はまだ捕まっていないぞ」
「はいそうです、妻田澪さんですよ」
「やるじゃん、刑事さん」
妻田 澪（つまだ みお）
巴のお隣さんで、『人面瘡』の事件で隼に救われた過去を持つ。

雨恋 遙(あまごい はるか)
サイバーレイン

いつもは普通の女子中学生だが、実は動画サイトで有名なネットアイドル。

もくじ

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デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑥

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

Prologue: Destruction, The Day Before

Humanity could no longer escape the vortex of information.

Television and radio signals poured down over even the most rural-looking scenery. An internet environment was maintained with cellphones, Wi-Fi, and LTE. Security networks were built up with security cameras and event data recorders. Weather forecasts were sent overt satellite broadcast and GPS. There were police and firefighter radios. Aircraft and ships had control systems. Even the ham radios used by a great variety of people added to the invisible vortex of information that dissolved right into the air. It filled every nook and cranny of the human world, so it was nearly impossible to find a clear bandwidth.

Some said cellphone signals caused cancer.

It was unclear what medical basis (if any) that rumor had, but it may have been a representation of the concerns held by the current age.

“What a pain.”

A girl’s voice too bewitching to call “cute” sounded in the middle of a metal and concrete city.

Compared to the storm of information that blotted out the world, this was but a minute grain of data.

Then again, information had always been about quality, not quantity.

At that time, it may have been best if the nation had set aside all else and focused on the information being produced here.

“More rumors are created and destroyed in these places than anywhere else in the world. For me, this may be like visiting my ancestors, but the big city really is exhausting.”

Her clothes resembled the white kimono of a bride.

She had long, bluish-black hair and a single knife-like horn seemed to split the bangs on her forehead. Bluish-white phosphorescence glowed at the tip of the horn.

Her childish face was belied by the glamorous figure that was noticeable even through the kimono that tended to hide one’s frame.

“But given what we’re going to do, it can’t hurt to take a look just this once. Ugh, I’m feeling dizzy.”

She was unique even among the deadly Youkai.

It was assumed she would be built up by human hands.

She was the blue oni that appeared at the end of the Hyakumonogatari and caused so very many supernatural phenomena.

Even after bringing together those one hundred fears, she still reigned supreme.

“Aoandon.”

A voice reached her from directly behind.

The deadly Youkai named the Aoandon looked back into the crowd and saw a skinny and nearly expressionless young man wearing a dark suit.

His name was Saiki Kazu.

He was a member of her group. This skilled user of the supernatural arts had misused an Aburatori Package and singlehandedly destroyed a *large criminal organization* with an international reach.

“The assembly is complete. We have no reason to stay here.”

“You did? Really??? But I’m still feeling that sharp pain.”

“I only use Youkai. I don’t change their fundamental nature.”

“Oh. I wonder if this is what menstrual cramps feel like.”

“As a man, I wouldn’t know.”

Saiki responded to her joke without moving a single eyebrow.

The Aoandan pouted her lips.

“Then I guess it’s time to put this country in check. And I’m still not sure whether I should call it Nihon or Nippon.”

“That kind of ambiguity is exactly what creates an opening for us.”

“What are the other members doing?”

“They are all waiting for your orders.”

“Yeah, some of them can be difficult to control. How’s Kada-chan doing?”

“Everything is at normal levels.”

“Sakogawa-chan?”

“Normal.”

“Iko-chan?”

“*That one has been crushed and taken in.*”

Oh, dear, groaned the Aoandon.

She did not seem to mind too much.

Saiki Kazu’s expression remained unmoved even with his ominous answer.

彼らが眺めていたものは国会議事堂。
彼らの指先はすでに、いつでも何度でもそこへ触れられる。

“But at the current stage, they have only been placed inside the Aoandon Package. The pieces needed to use it properly are still missing. Do you have any ideas concerning that?”

“Not to worry. This is the last train and the departure bell is ringing, but we still have a chance to jump onboard.”

“Meaning?”

“Let’s travel some more. I’m sure we’ll find some interesting new members.”

“You’re leaving the very last part up to luck?”

“We’ll win regardless.” The Aoandon grinned. “Coincidences aren’t determined by luck. It’s set by destiny, karma, and fate. So if our success has already been decided, everything we need will gather around us on its own. Just like the man named Saiki Kazu appeared before me when I wanted someone skilled in the supernatural arts.”

“…”

“If I wasn’t going to succeed, I wouldn’t have been successful from the very beginning. The situation is already underway and you could say it’s been proven that no one can stop it once it is. You can leave it up to luck or pray to the gods if you want. No matter what miracles you carry with you, you can’t change the end result once you find yourself in front of me.”

That may have been why she so readily turned her back on the target she had been staring at this whole time.

She did so as casually as someone leaving a neighborhood friend’s house they could return to at any time.

“We’ll see each other again before long,” said the blue oni girl.

Saki Kazu followed her in his dark suit.

They were standing in the Nagatacho district of Tokyo’s Chiyoda Ward.

They had been looking at the National Diet Building.

It was already within their reach whenever they decided to reach for it.

Chapter 1: Introduction@Jinnai Shinobu & Yonsesaki Hiro

Part 1 (Jinnai Shinobu)

In the end, I didn't get even a wink of sleep.

"You idiot! You complete moron!! I told you this was your fault! It hung up because it mixed up the signals from my room and yours after you messed with the router's settings!"

"Ahem. You can blame it all on the video lagging while I was playing my FPS."

"You aren't getting out of this by pouting your lips. Oh, honestly. It didn't record that foreign drama because of this… What happened to that terrorist after he jumped from the dam!? There's no way he's dead!!"

"Shinobu, listing past regrets isn't going to change anything. Think of it as the beauty next door asking you to hook up her digital recorder. It sounds like a lovely memory now, doesn't it? Yes, and you spent all night with her."

It was true that Zashiki Warashi didn't often come begging me for help with her hands clasped together and tears in her upturned eyes. Just how addicted to entertainment was she? The real problem was that her description had made my heart skip a beat. If she found out, she'd have me doing her bidding for the rest of my life!

By the way, her room was filled with the sweet smell of incense. Once I finally got the internet connection working, the cable broadcast returned to the flat screen TV. When I saw the dry early morning news playing, I finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Disconnection education or trauma disconnection is the idea of optimizing the brain's network of synapses using the fact that heavy mental stress will block some of the circuits in the brain. The experts have admitted this provides extraordinary improvements in calculation speed, but at the same time…"

It was just too dry. Given the time, it was too early for breakfast but too late to get some sleep. Even if I washed my face and set my hair, I'd still have some time leftover.

It was mid-October. After finishing with my face and hair and putting on my winter school uniform, I had a little extra time on my hands, so I decided to play with the Nekomata, a relatively sensible Youkai.

"Nekomata-san, Nekomata-san."

"What is it now? Why are you bothering a lady as she tries to eat?"

She sounded a little annoyed, but that might have been because my Western cuisine loving mom was in charge of the cat food today. The can of tuna cat food cost a little

more than the human food, but this Nekomata much preferred the “cat rice” my grandma made by putting miso soup on leftover rice.

Giving that cat rice to a normal cat would be deadly with all the salt and the green onion, but this was a Youkai. Things must have been different for her.

The Nekomata devoured the can of food despite her displeasure, so I sat in front of her and asked about something.

“It’s been two or three months since we met, hasn’t it?”

“Munch, munch. What about it?”

“Then I think it’s about time we brought our communication to the next level.”

“?”

“Let me touch your tai-…”

“I’ll kill you, brat.”

She didn’t even let me finish.

Don’t think I’m going to give up! I’ve got nothing else to do!! And I’m going a little nuts from the lack of sleep!! (←Yes, I was well aware that was the cause.)

“C’mon, c’mon. Just a little, okay? Let me touch your tail just a little. Do it with a normal cat and it would scratch your hand with a cross counter, but I can talk it out with you since you understand human language!!”

“If you know I won’t like it, then don’t force me to put up with it! You sure are impudent for an M!!”

“Oh, come one! You’ve got two tails and I’m only asking to touch one! Quit being so stingy!!”

“How stupid can one brat be!? Would you agree to have one of your balls crushed just because you have two of them!? And I called you an M, so how about you at least deny it!?”

As we argued, my spine tingled as an intense gaze reached it.

For one thing, the gaze came from somewhere unusual.

“Wh-what? The ceiling? Gh!?”

“…”

When I looked straight up, I saw a square hole removed from a corner of the ceiling like something from a ninja mansion and I saw two eyeballs peering down from it.

The succubus that lived in the attic was observing our exchange. With round goat horns, bat-like wings, an arrow-shaped tail, and her micro-bikini, she was (from a purely visual perspective) a wonderful housemate, but…

“Master, if you want to play with a tail, you can always use mine!!”

“Why do you sound so excited!?”

“Because I’ve been so bored living in the countryside!! There’s no stimulation from young men and women here!!”

The Western demon slipped down from the ceiling.

“Look, look. If you want to touch a tail, you can try mine out as much as you want. If you like, I can moan erotically every time you poke it which should leave an impressive bulge in your pants before you head off to school! In the world of imagination, of course!!”

“Oh, sorry. It doesn’t work if I know it’s an act.”

Besides, I already knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to love on that cat’s tail! I had to see if it was as soft and fluffy as I imagined it was!!

But the Succubus pouted her lips.

“Boo. You’re too cold, master. Maybe it would be more effective if I messed with you instead. I could use the arrow on my tail to thrust right on in from behind.”

“Wait! Wait!! You’re doing what to where!?”

I was already panicking, but that was when yet another deadly Youkai wandered in.

This yandere marriage hunting Youkai was the Yuki Onna.

“Nope! Back right on up!! I’m not letting you make this any more complicated! And you don’t even have a tail!!”

I prepared myself to flee at a moment’s notice, but the Yuki Onna was acting oddly.

Her face was as red as a boiled octopus, her kimono was practically falling off of her, and she was swaying back and forth.

Hm? Huh? Was her kimono always this baggy???

“Haphew… Trying to take a morning bath was a mistake… I-it was practically boiling after your grandfather took his bath…”

The freezing chill that usually hung around her had vanished.

What’s going on here? Did that hot bath weaken her? And she still looks soaking wet.

So that means…oh?

Are her deadly below-zero defenses not working right now?

And she’s still intent on marriage?

Huh?

So what would happen if I let her take control of the situation and we ended up on the floor together?

“…”

I, Master Gentleman Shinobu, cleared my throat and stood up from the tatami mats.

I put on my best gentlemanly look and spoke.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to lay out a futon over there to help nurse the overheated Yuki Onna back to health.”

“Getting her drunk and taking advantage of her? You really are the worst.”

“That is *not* what I’m doing!! Removing her violent side just barely brings her into the acceptable zone. …But wait. What is this? Is she melting or shrinking? Where did those small yet promising breasts go!? Now, I’m even less sure, but I bet this weakened state is only temporary. The second I do anything, she’ll probably make a full recovery and freeze me! So for today, I’m just going to keep an eye on her!! Damn, if only her chest was still there!!!!!”

“Oh, c’moooon, master!! If you’d only told me, I could have let you use all sorts of cheats to get any girl to fall in love with you. How about it? To get you started, I’ll let you try one out at the low, low price of only one year from your lifespan!”

“I said I’m not doing anything today!! And I’m not interested in that right now anyway! Now, Nekomata, just let me touch your fluffy tail!!”

“Don’t turn that Succubus’s attention my way. Stick with the Yuki Onna.”

“Is it just me or are you leading me in that direction even as you look down on me for doing it?”

“And now your muscular dad is standing right behind you. So how do you plan to explain your way out of this one?”

Eh? No, wait!!

“You’ve got it all wrong!! Eh? Wh-why are you clenching that gigantic fist as hard as rock!? They were the ones leading me astray! I was only trying to nurse her back to health, so it would be wrong to only hit me!!”

Part 2 (Jinnai Shinobu)

After the great panic that morning, it was time to leave for school.

“Oh…ohhh…ohhhhh…”

I groaned and rubbed the top of my head as I plodded along the usual path to school. After my dad’s fist dropped, the Youkai and demon fled like they were hit by the shockwave of a meteor strike. The Zashiki Warashi hadn’t even been in the same room, but she still spent a while hiding under the tea table (without realizing her butt was sticking out). Honestly, there were too many questions about the way that man scared Youkai.

Hmm.

This winter uniform's collar is too stiff!! I know I'm probably just not used to it after not wearing it for so long, but it's still bothering me!!

And then…

"Today's lunch is sukiyaki! What an age we live in."

"First years, don't leave the sidewalk."

"PE's so boring now that swimming lessons are over."

What's this? What's this?

It felt like there were a lot more little kids than usual.

When I gave the backpack-wearing group a puzzled look, a sporty classmate of mine named Tarou spoke up after joining me from another farm road.

"You hadn't heard, Jinnai? A bunch of city kids were invited to the elementary school. It's an entire year of kids from some city school. They're calling it a cultural exchange and it's making things pretty cramped for those of us in the lodging group. I want permanent residence in this village so bad. I don't want to be a servant to some brats."

"Yeah… Who knows how much it would cost to stay in an Intellectual Village inn."

"Your place doesn't accept guests, so I'm pretty jealous. Of course, that wouldn't leave anywhere for me. Some places take in about twenty people in one house. That really makes you feel like a maid. I don't know if it has to do with the genius kid boom they've been talking about, but those city kids see right through anything you try to get by them. They're so not cute."

It was easy to tell which ones lived here and which ones were from the city. One group looked shocked whenever a Youkai showed up and the other group ignored them completely.

"There's a 30% chance of rain today. I must protect my master from a sudden downpour!"

"The sun sets quickly once autumn begins, so it couldn't hurt to have a lantern!!"

An Umbrella Obake and a Lantern Obake with a single eye and a large tongue sticking out were carefully guarding a boy of about ten from either side.

Let's see… That boy in the blue sweater and beige pants is Yonesaki Hiro, right? Didn't I meet him during that stuff with the Shichinin Misaki?

"Jinnai, is there any kind of Youkai you want?"

"With them, I really don't think it's about what you want."

After all, you suddenly find them living with you! That might have had something to do with how my Youkai-loving mom kept taking them in, though!!

"Eh? But wouldn't you love to be like Taira no Masakado or Takiyasha-hime? Don't you dream of being completely untouchable as the ultimate Youkai tamer?"

“I think they dealt more with vengeful spirits than Youkai. And no thank you. That always ends with having your physical body taken over.”

“But our school has a bomb shelter dungeon. You’d have to be crazy if that doesn’t get your imagination going!”

“That’s just part of the disaster infrastructure in case a typhoon or landslide isolates the village. After all, an Intellectual Village is so reliant on online shopping that we’d starve with the roads cut off. All you’ll find in that shelter are sleeping bags and canned biscuits.”

“If you go to the very bottom, there’s gotta be a half-naked spring spirit girl with wet, see-through clothes!!”

We continued our discussion all the way to our high school.

The classroom was filled with activity before homeroom because first period was PE. My school had a general understanding that the boys changed in the classroom while the girls changed in the locker room. I couldn’t have been the only one who shed tears of blood that it wasn’t the opposite, allowing me to “accidentally” open the door to that world of pink.

“Have you heard, Shinobu-kun? We’re running a marathon for PE today. Can you believe that? And after I was up until four in the morning trading and drinking health drinks.”

“Madoka, you really need to get some common sense. They split up the boys and girls for PE, so… Whoa!? Our summer wasn’t over after all!!”

“Thank you for the reaction I expected. Can I hit you now?”

My classmate, the eccentric beauty named Madoka-chan, was squirming and rubbing her thighs together, but that was obviously because of the red bloomers she had changed into for PE. And while her hair was short, it was cutely tied on either side.

“Honestly, I thought we were finally free of this now that autumn is here, but they said track suits aren’t allowed for the marathon! We have to run outside the school grounds dressed like this. Can you believe that!? I know Intellectual Villages create a high-quality agricultural brand name by intentionally reproducing the original scenery of Japan, but they didn’t have to bring this back with it! It feels like using your computer’s recovery point and bringing back a virus you thought you’d already dealt with!!”

Angry Madoka was speaking faster and a lot more than usual.

Hm, I see. Since she’s so isolated with no connections to our other classmates, I bet I could improve her bit by bit a lot like with shock therapy. Grin, grin.

“Sigh. Never mind. Shinobu-kun, you don’t hold back when you have a chance to look, do you?”

“By the way, we’ve known each other since April, so that’s over half a year. Isn’t it about time we ended up back to back in a hot spring after we unexpectedly find out it’s a mixed bath?”

“Keep up the perverted jokes and I’ll have my armed guards snipe you.”

“Oh, no fair! You’ve got two breasts, so can’t I grope just one of them!?”

“Shinobu-kun, that makes no sense. You have two eyes, but does that mean you don’t mind if I jab my finger into one?”

“If I can give up an eye for near-permanent access to one of these breasts, you can call me Mr. Eyepatch!!”

Madoka’s expression immediately grew flat as she gave up on thinking.

She then snapped her fingers.

“Heyyy, Whatever-Your-Name-Is Nagisaaa.”

“You!! You’ll call in Nagisa when you don’t want to deal with something now!? Couldn’t you find a less horrifying way to get smarter!?”

It may have been good for Madoka to have some interactions with some other classmates, but that didn’t make it any less frightening. If Nagisa’s yandere thought processes infected Madoka, the power of money would turn her into an even greater monster!

At any rate, it was time for an appearance from Japan’s #1 girl when it came to carrying a chainsaw in the pale bluish light of the full moon.

“What is it, Shinobu-chan? Are you recruiting the people you need for a love spell? Eh heh heh…”

“No! I have no plans for any insane ceremonies involving muttering magic words while cutting your wrist to pour blood into a handmade box lunch!! Bye!!”

I raised a hand and made a full speed dash from the girls in bloomers.

Nooo!! The guys are supposed to change in the classroom, but that’s a lost cause now. I have to stay away from this area for a bit, so I might be stuck changing in the bathroom!!

As I shed tears and a youthful sweat, I ran down the hallway and collided with my nervous homeroom teacher who suddenly appeared from the stairway.

“Wakyaaah!?”

“Bfh!? Y-you’re kidding me? Why do you have toast in your mouth at school!?”

“I know we fell into a heap here, but if that hand keeps creeping silently toward my chest, I’ll scream!!”

Tch. She noticed.

And come to think of it, how does that cliché even happen!? If I really grabbed her breast with my full weight on her, I think I’d either sprain my wrist or break her ribs!!

“No, wait. If I fall down normally from the initial hit, roll on the floor to change position, and reach out my hand, I can ignore my weight and the potential energy. That means it might be possible to get a nice feel in without worrying about the risks

of the fall. But I can't pull that off right away. It'll take some commitment. Maybe I'll start by getting the judo team to help me practice my falling technique. Mutter, mutter…"

"Um, Jinnai-kun?"

I suddenly noticed my homeroom teacher with teary eyes beyond her glasses as she sat on the floor closely guarding her chest with both hands.

Oh, dear. Did I frighten you, young lady?

"Heh. Not to worry, teacher. Not even I would treat a virgin roughly. I know how to contain myself, so please relax."

"Wha-!?"

"I mean, that necklace came as an extra in the fashion magazine Autofocus, didn't it? It costs less than two hundred yen! And isn't that magazine's primary demographic middle school girls? If you're still seriously consulting that at your age, it makes some things pretty clear."

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-!?"

My homeroom teacher's entire face grew beet red and she began waving her hands around for some reason.

There was no sign left of her previous fear.

Hah hahhh. This is what happens when Jinnai Shinobu, shock therapy master, is on the case!!

"Mutter, mutter. It's true Ram-chan wrote that it's an all-purpose piece that anyone from children to adults could-… N-no, you've got it all wrong!! The thing is…um…It's certainly not true that I have no experience whatsoever at my age!!"

"What's wrong with that? It's a beautiful thing. It's perfectly fine. In a way, it's rare find."

"You're attacking me with that 'in a way', aren't you!? You added a silent laugh in your heart, didn't you!? I'll have you know that I spent my college days in the big city of Tokyo! Every day and every night was spent in melted in someone's arms like ice cream on a sunny day!!"

"Do go on."

"And it goes way beyond just lovers! It was…um, is it called friends with benefits? I still have some of the addresses from back then. Yes, yes. And it involved all sorts of things that I could never tell a high schooler like you about. You'd be left amazed that those things could be used like that! O-oh, it's such a shame. I can't think of a good way to explain to you just how obscene and splendid my weekends are. Ah ha ha ha ha."

"Do, do go on."

She meaninglessly thrust her chest out proudly and waved her hand as a fan to combat the sweat pouring down her entire body.

But was she aware of the new threat approaching from directly behind her?

“Ahem! …Tanioka-sensei, care to explain just what you were talking about there?”

“Eh? Ah? Eeeek!? P-principal!?”

“I prefer not to invade on others’ privacy, but I believe I just heard something unbecoming of the holy profession of an educator and I’m not quite sure what to do about it.”

“A-ahhh!! That’s not it at all, principal! Kh, but if I deny it all here, Jinnai-kun will think-… Waaah! How am I supposed to explain this!?”

“No need to worry. You can explain everything in the soundproofed student guidance room. …Of course, this is the first time in my long time as a teacher that I’ve heard of a teacher needing to be scolded in there.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!? J-Jinnai-kun, see you later!!”

I waved a hand as my nervous homeroom teacher was dragged away by the back of her neck with tears in her eyes.

With an entirely serious expression, I pulled out my cellphone.

“Good, it can record audio. Good, it can record video.”

After checking its functions one by one, I too made my way toward the student guidance room.

Now, then. It’s time for some sleazy desire! If she’s being questioned over what she said, she’s definitely going to be asked if she’s a virgin or if she slept around like crazy. We can’t have that! I simply can’t allow that kind of sexual harassment to happen behind closed doors in the constitutional state of Japan! In the name of having audiovisual records of the outrage, I, Jinnai Shinobu, must do my part to ensure the smooth execution of fair and impartial justice. More specifically, I want to see her face when he asks her and makes her squirm!!!!!

In the end, I got a little too carried away and the principal found me almost immediately.

I ended up sitting in the student guidance room right alongside my homeroom teacher.

Part 3 (Yonesaki Hiro)

Today’s walk to school was a little more exhausting than usual.

The kids from the city for the cultural exchange kept asking questions and my throat was sore just from answering them all. I had the umbrella and lantern helping me, so the other kids must have had it even worse.

“There’s a 30% chance of rain today. I must protect my master from a sudden downpour!”

“The sun sets quickly once autumn begins, so it couldn’t hurt to have a lantern!!”

The kids from the city were extremely interested in the umbrella and lantern that kept pestering me. They grabbed at and tugged on the two Obake.

To me, those kids were the strange ones.

For one thing, the color of their backpacks wasn't normal. Instead of red or black, they all had different colors like sky blue or emerald green. They said some of them could swap out the cover for another color based on their mood that day.

Their clothes were the same. To describe what each one of them was wearing would require using four or five brand names you heard about on TV.

"Have you seen Corundum's new color? I don't think I could put that on my nails."

"Also, Kanade-chan really is going to use her spring boots during fall too."

"That drinkable perfume apparently doesn't work. Mi-chan from Class 2 collapsed from it."

Listening to their conversations made me feel a little embarrassed. I chose my own clothes too, but only from the online stores my mom said I was allowed to use. It made me feel immature.

The local kids and I had to explain everything to the mature-looking city kids. It all felt unbalanced, so I had trouble relaxing.

I was already feeling isolated and it didn't help that the girl walking next to me was especially mature-looking even among the city kids. She felt like the center of both her class and her entire year.

"An Intellectual Village has lots of Youkai, right?"

Her name was apparently Ranzono Sachi-chan.

Her long, chestnut hair had fluffy curls with enough volume to make her already small face look even smaller. On the side of her head, she had a…what do you call those? It was a white rose accessory. Her slender, doll-like body was covered by a white turtleneck sweater, a reddish jacket with the front open, a black miniskirt, skintight jeans, and chocolate-colored boots. She also had a leather belt loosely wrapped around her waist. According to the others, all of her clothes were from a fashion magazine that middle schoolers read.

And that wasn't surprising.

"Heh heh. A nostalgic coloration wouldn't be bad. Wearing an actual kimono would be out of the question, but combining the amber brown of wood with red Japanese paper could make for a decent coloration."

"Will you make it in time for the next issue?"

"Probably not, but I can do what I want for the issue after that. Heh heh. I'm a model and a writer, so I can absorb plenty here and bring it to everyone else."

That was the gist of it.

On the day Ranzono-san and the others arrived, my classmates had already gotten their hands on enough information to have gathered the fashion magazine Autofocus that middle schoolers read. Middle schoolers seemed out of our reach and even they looked up to Ranzono-san, so knowing the person pictured in the magazine would be standing with us and breathing the same air as us had filled the class with excitement.

Ranzono-san herself was very aloof and did not seem nervous when everyone focused on her. As she peered inside the lantern from above and opened and closed the umbrella, we arrived at the wooden elementary school.

She commented on the schoolyard.

“I see you can play soccer outside in rural schools.”

I had always had trouble speaking with girls, so I had no idea what to say to a celebrity who seemed to be from a different world.

I managed to work out a safe answer.

“Are schools in the city different?”

“We don’t have a schoolyard. We only have the area inside the fence on the rooftop.”

I didn’t see any real sparkle in her eyes when she said that, so she might not have been all that interested in sports.

The PE outfits the city kids had were so much cooler than ours. They had called them…um…spats, was it? They were streamlined and cool like the swimsuits designed to make you swim fast or an F1 racer. They were so much better than our rectangular shorts.

But I wasn’t sure what to do when Ranzono-san didn’t say anything.

I just wasn’t any good at speaking with girls. I only went with the safe and harmless things that everyone had asked and everyone already knew the answer to.

“How do you become a model for a magazine?”

“Heh heh. I’m a model and a writer. They contact you. Anyone’s fine as long as they’re active online. It’s entirely based on merit, so they treat me just like an adult and I design the layout for a magazine middle schoolers read.”

“Middle schoolers, huh?”

That seemed like such a distant world. It felt as far off as the moon. I knew people had gone there, but I couldn’t picture myself standing there.

In other words, Ranzono-san was standing on the moon like that.

We could all tell she was hopelessly out of reach for rural kids like us and it made perfect sense that she was the leader of the city kids. We were all obsessed with talking about “the moon”.

“Hey, is it true Intellectual Villages are full of rare Youkai?”

“There are plenty like the umbrella and lantern, if that’s what you mean.”

“Hmm. I was thinking of something bigger. Like an Oomukade or Tsuchigumo.”

“I wouldn’t know about that… I do know an *older boy* who knows a whole lot about Youkai, though.”

“I see.”

“But you know a lot for a city kid.”

“Heh heh. I did a lot of studying.”

The chirping of a small bird interrupted us. I looked over but didn’t see an actual bird.

“That’s an Okuri-Suzume,” said Ranzono-san with a smile.

“?”

“An O-Ku-Ri-Su-Zu-Me. Heh heh. It’s a small bird Youkai that no can see. Its voice is supposed to inform people of coming danger.”

She was so smart. She could study, she could do sports, she knew lots about fashion, she played the piano during music class, and she seemed good at cooking during home ec. It felt like there was nothing I could do better than her. I had thought Youkai knowledge would be the one thing, so it was embarrassing having her explain one of them to me when I actually lived in an Intellectual Village.

Our conversation ended there.

I worried that I should say something and that staying silent would be bad, but I couldn’t find anything to say.

We simply walked toward the school entrance in silence.

As time went on, I realized something.

This doesn’t feel all that bad.

It was just like the umbrella and lantern that were always with me. There was no reason to keep playing catch with our conversation like shoveling coal into a steam engine. Simply giving ourselves over to the flow of time while walking side by side was plenty relaxing. It felt somehow meaningful.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

It felt like I could get along with her after all.

I certainly hoped I would be able to.

Part 4 (3rd person)

The Umbrella Obake was sticking upside-down into the umbrella stand to one side of the elementary school's entranceway. His large tongue was sticking out and hanging down due to the pull of gravity.

"…"

"U-Umbrella!! This trial is necessary to protect Hiro-sama! So stick with it for another five hours!!"

"Heh. A lantern like you could never understand the grudge of an umbrella left behind like this! Ahh, ahh. I know all too well how a cheap plastic umbrella must feel!!"

The Tsukumogami seemed worked up, but they were really just bored. They were worried about Yonesaki Hiro of the family that owned them, but there was nothing they could do during school. If they tried, the teacher would throw them out. That of course meant they needed to supply themselves with a way to pass the time until school let out.

Today, the lantern carried a teen fashion magazine named Autofocus in her mouth.

"Now, let's see here. The bonus magazine gives twenty ways to ensure your love comes true."

"What can a lantern like you learn from a magazine for humans?"

"I am a lady, you know!? I worry about looking after my skin!!"

"And I'm asking how that magazine will help a lantern!"

As they argued, the umbrella moved his single upside-down eye to stare at the magazine's pages with the lantern. He was a man(?) at heart, so he doubted it would interest him much. Still, he needed some way to pass the time.

But…

"What are all these stripes? I thought a fashion magazine would be filled with models posing in colorful clothing."

"These are called barcodes or matrix codes. They're also called AR markers. Basically, you can hold up a cellphone or smartphone to see images or videos of the models."

The umbrella looked to the magazine that had codes filling the boxes that would normally hold pictures.

"How strange. Then why not look at it all on the internet in the first place?"

"They apparently did that at first. It was only after setting up a successful online business that they decided to enter the paper magazine industry."

The lantern only knew so much because the children had been talking about little else. Model and writer Ranzono Sachi gathered enough attention to drive out all other conversation. Hanako-san and the statue of Ninomiya Kinjirou had to be crying.

“They scout people without asking about age, qualifications, education, or work history. You can be a scathing critic on a blog, a frequent user of ratings sites, a popular commenter on an SNS, or a creator on a video sharing site. You only need some accomplishments online. Human jobs certainly have changed a lot.”

The internal staff may have been the only exception because the magazine filled with black and white codes included a few actual pictures of posing models.

Although based on their sensibilities, the AR and video codes may have been the main draw while the normal pictures were only meant to fill space.

The model wearing winter boots a little early was Ranzono Sachi.

“They’re pushing her as their top model, but she’s also part of their internal staff. She’s probably easy to use when they need to fill some holes in the magazine.”

“Kids sure have it tough. There are plenty of things they can’t do once they grow up, so I feel like they should make the most of being a kid while they can.”

“Yes, Umbrella, but you mustn’t say that in front of Hiro-sama. At their age, nothing irritates them more than being lumped together with everyone else by saying what they should or shouldn’t do.”

“Hmm.”

“Also, they’re only using the right person for the job. Unlike us, humans only have a short time to live. They don’t have time to have an outsider blocking their freedom and holding them pointlessly in place.”

“Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.”

Part 5 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The principal got even more heated up than expected in the student guidance room, so – to make a long story short – coffee sprayed from his mouth like a poisonous fog and it poured all over my nervous homeroom teacher.

However, she had no real change of clothes with her, so she had been forced to borrow the “last resort” from the infirmary.

In other words, she had a dead look in her eyes as she stood at the front of the class in a PE outfit.

She wore fiercely red bloomers.

“Um, so when it says ‘spit’ here, it refers to a folk belief at the time. The story of Tawara no Touta slaying the Oomukade with an arrow he had spit on ended up spreading far enough for people to falsely believe that all Youkai had a weakness to saliva…”

She continued her lesson in monotone while looking just like a robot printing a long trail of paper from its mouth.

Hmm, my heart is throbbing from guilt.

Still, it was the principal who made the finishing blow and, more importantly, this is some nice eye candy! I never knew how nice my teacher looked from behind as she wrote her boring notes up on the blackboard!! Yahoo! And while Madoka-san and the others are wearing short sleeve shirts with their bloomers, adding on the track suit jacket is pretty nice, too!! But only the jacket!! (←Important emphasis)

But then something interfered.

I heard a chirping small bird fly in through the open window.

“Hm, what? Did something come in!?”

“Is it a sparrow?”

“I don’t see anything? Did it get behind something?”

The class grew noisy, but then I saw a small bird’s footprints on the paper of my open notebook.

It was the same bizarre scene as an invisible man stepping in some mud.

“An invisible bird Youkai? Is this an Okuri-Suzume or something?”

“Oh, honestly!! Jinnai-kun, can you please give it a rest!? If you have some business with a Youkai, take it out in the hall!! Out!!”

“Eh? I don’t have any control over it!!”

I had no idea what was going on, but the invisible Okuri-Suzume was chirping something in its high-pitched voice.

No, now it was clearly speaking in human language.

“Trouble, trouble! Hiro-chan is in trouble!”

“Who the heck is Hiro-…”

“(Wham!!)”

“Ow!? You idiot, don’t peck at the back of my head! My scalp! My scalp!!”

“Hiro-chan is Hiro-chan. Yonesaki Hiro-chan!!”

Hm?

Yonesaki Hiro?

“Hiro-chan is in trouble. Boy, the time has come to stand up!!”

“Why do I have to-…”

“The Okuri-Suzume is a Youkai that warns of coming danger, but we originally could only warn that the Okuri-Ookami was coming. I tried to change that, but I keep having to work in symbols of the Okuri-Ookami. I tried to warn Hiro-chan directly, but it didn’t get through to him.”

“Again, why me?”

“All of the Youkai around her say Jinnai Shinobu is an Okuri-Ookami!! So I tried speaking to the Okuri-Ookami. And just as I thought, humans can understand me when I’m near you!!”

“Bfh!? Please try not to destroy my social life with some bizarre misunderstanding!![1] L-let’s discuss this further in the hallway, Okuri-Suzume!!”

“Hiro-chan is in trouble!”

To drive off the Okuri-Suzume that did not care at all about the circumstances of human society, I stepped out into the hall.

Which Youkai has been spreading half-truths about me!? I’d bet anything it was that Good-for-Nothing Youkai!!

But for now…

“What exactly is this about? Why is Yonesaki Hiro in trouble?”

“Save Hiro-chan! Before that deadly Youkai eats him!!”

“If an Okuri-Suzume is going nuts, has an Okuri-Ookami shown up?”

While the term Okuri-Ookami was often used in reference to a certain type of human, it was originally a type of Youkai.

It was a wolf that appeared on dark roads at night and followed travelers around. That alone would cause no harm, but if the traveler tripped, it would attack and eat them.

But…

“No, this is a different Youkai.”

This thing was invisible, so I had no way of knowing how it was acting.

Regardless, I heard it continuing to speak.

“It’s an Oomukade. An Oomukade is after Hiro-chan, so he’s in trouble!”

Part 6 (Yonesaki Hiro)

Classes for the day were over.

After cleaning the classroom and lining up the desks, the end of my right pinky finger itched a little. It didn’t look like anything had happened to it, but something might have irritated it.

Meanwhile, Ranzono-san was looking in her hand mirror in a corner of the classroom. She was staring at it with a serious look on her face, patting a hand across her face, and stretching her cheek with her fingers.

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[1] Idiomatically, an Okuri-Ookami refers to a man who feigns kindness to get a woman to let her guard down enough for him to attack her.

“What are you doing? Everyone’s already gone.”

“Oh, nothing.”

I called out to her and she quickly put the mirror in her backpack. She might not have wanted anyone to see her maintaining her looks.

The city kids and the local kids had all gone wherever they wanted to play, so it was only Ranzono-san and me. We naturally ended up leaving the school and walking home together.

Huh?

Am I forgetting something?

I clenched my hands trying to fill the blank in my mind, but it wasn’t working.

At the same time, Ranzono-san spoke to me.

“Would we be able to see a ton of Youkai if we went to the mountain?”

“The rice has already been harvested, but you should be able to see a Kappa if you go to the fields.”

“Is that so?”

I had said the fields, but she looked to the paddies for some reason. *Some adults were gathered* in the distance, but I couldn’t tell what they were doing from this distance.

“The Yamawaro – those are Kappa that have come up onto land – help with the work in the mountains. They mostly help the lumberjacks, but they apparently also help in the paddies and fields nearer the mountains. I’ve heard they’re something like migrant workers.”

Youkai, Youkai. …Hmm, it’s on the tip of my tongue.

I still couldn’t remember whatever it was, so I gave up. That was when my cellphone gave high-pitched ring. This was different from the usual ringtone. Even someone as high-tech as Ranzono-san didn’t seem to know what this was because her eyes opened wide.

We both peered down at the screen.

“It looks like a local message, but it doesn’t usually make this loud a sound.”

“Heh heh. There are emergency alerts, aren’t there? So what is it? Did someone spot a deadly Youkai?”

When an unfamiliar deadly Youkai appeared on the way to or from school, the school would tell us to be careful, so this kind of alert had to be an absolute last resort.

I checked more closely and read the message.

“Warning!! An Oomukade has been spotted. This Youkai is not from Noukotsu Village, so caution is needed. Be very careful if you run across it. One: do not

approach it. Two: if you run away, it will chase after you. Stay put and see what it is doing. In the off chance that it approaches even further, a weapon with spit on it is said to be effective.”

I tilted my head.

“An Oomukade? What kind of Youkai is that? Is it just a big centipede?”

“…”

“It’d be pretty scary if it’s poisonous. It might be best not to get near the mountain.”

“No,” said Ranzono-san.

She pouted her lips in a somehow childish way that was the complete opposite of how she had acted before.

“The Oomukade isn’t a bad Youkai. There’s a story about it eating a clan of dragon gods, but doesn’t that mean it never actually ate humans? The humans just chose to side with one type of Youkai and then decided to slay the Oomukade.”

“Hm?”

“Like I said…!!”

Ranzono-san seemed irritated, but something else was bothering me more.

I hesitated to bring it up, but finally did.

“Ranzono-san, do you have something on your face?”

I looked up at her from below.

When I did, I could tell it was only a grass seed stuck to her. It had probably been blown there by the wind.

That was all it was.

But a moment later, Ranzono-san pressed the back of her hand to her cheek as if trying to tear it away.

I was left speechless.

Meanwhile, she frantically pulled her hand mirror from her backpack and checked her face. She had done the same thing while we cleaned up afterschool. She touched all over her face and even pinched and pulled at her skin.

“Here’s fine. No problem here either. Where? Where is it? Where is it out of balance? I thought I was fine after getting through PE without issue…”

She was muttering something under her breath, she was breathing heavily, and her eyes were rolling around in her head.

What was going on?

She may have misunderstood what I meant, so I tried speaking to her again.

“You have a grass seed near your bangs. Want me to get it for you?”

“Eh? Ah!?”

A blank look came over her as the previous horrified one vanished entirely.

She didn’t seem to know what to do with the mirror in her hands, so she fidgeted her fingers, grabbing and letting go of the device.

For some reason, her maturity had completely vanished.

“Where? Where is it???”

“Here.”

I ended up grabbing it for her.

Touching her nice-smelling chestnut hair made my heart race a bit.

“You couldn’t see it in the mirror?”

“Well…”

What had she been checking, anyway? What had she been so focused on that she had completely overlooked that obvious grass seed?

It seemed strange, but I didn’t have time to ask.

We had reached a fork in the farm road and she took the branch that didn’t lead to my house.

“I-I’ll be going now. See you tomorrow, Yonesaki-kun.”

“Sure.”

She nearly ran into a blonde-hired high school boy walking down that path, so she gave a quick shriek and jogged off toward the house she was staying in.

The high school boy looked back with a puzzled look and muttered something.

“What was that? *Was it what they call a Twelve?*”

Part 7 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I thought about the girl who had rushed off a moment ago.

She had worn a miniskirt, jeans, a turtleneck sweater, a jacket, and a white rose corsage on the side of her head.

She was probably one of the city elementary school kids here for the cultural exchange Tarou had mentioned.

I’m impressed she can do that.

I’d never be able to live with such a constrained lifestyle.

I was half impressed and half shocked, but then the boy left all alone called out to me.

He was Yonesaki Hiro, the elementary school boy who had been involved in the Shichinin Misaki incident.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing, really. …By the way, where are the umbrella and lamp that are always with you?”

“Ah!?”

He frantically turned back the way he had come, so he really must have simply forgotten.

As soon as I started feeling sorry for those one-eyed Youkai, they came rushing up the farm road at tremendous speed, as if my feelings had summoned them.

The Umbrella Obake and the Lamp Obake’s comical eyeballs locked onto me instead of Yonesaki Hiro.

“Stranger danger!!”

“Time for punishment!!”

Dfah!?

D-did those things really just tackle me at full speed!? The lamp’s one thing, but that closed umbrella jabbing into my solar plexus seems like it could be pretty dangerous!

They turned toward their master while ignoring me as I held my gut and groaned.

“Are you okay, master?”

“Honestly. Going home on your own is far too dangerous after an Oomukade alert was sent out.”

Yonesaki Hiro tilted his head as if he did not understand what they were talking about.

He then opened his mouth and asked a question.

“What’s an Oomukade?”

He seemed to be asking me more than the umbrella or lamp.

Don’t tell me he thinks I’m a Youkai Buster who can handle any kind of Youkai after I dealt with that Shichinin Misaki incident.

At any rate…

“It’s a giant centipede Youkai. Their size can vary a lot, but the bigger ones are apparently long enough to wrap around a mountain seven and a half times. You don’t often hear it, but they supposedly get their power through weird rituals like waiting for one hundred years or climbing a waterfall.”

“What does it do?”

“I don’t know. It depends on the time and the situation. Some say they can deflect any attack, some say they’re wrapped in lightning, some say they cause storms, some say their one hundred legs glow like torches, and some say the poison in their bodies can be used in rituals. The most famous one is the one that appeared around Lake Biwa and ate the dragon god clan. That one was then slain by a warrior. If they can eat dragon gods, I assume they can eat humans too. The dragon gods supposedly walked on two legs and looked like beautiful men and women.”

“Hmm.”

Yonesaki Hiro only gave a vague response and fell silent.

As a high schooler, I may not be one to talk, but kids these days are a pain to deal with.

The umbrella and lamp caused an uproar of their own in his place.

“We saw some damage from the Oomukade on the way here! The support for a roadside solar power generator was broken. If it had hit someone, there would be nothing they could do!”

“And in the paddies, the wall of a pump shed was broken. They say small fires and crimes against small animals are the harbinger of a major crime, so this is kind of scary. Tremble, tremble.”

Hm?

They saw signs of it too?

“I came from that way and I saw a few things like a tree fallen by the candy shop or a broken fence at a house.”

“See! It really is a deadly Youkai! And one dangerous enough to eat other Youkai!!”

“Yeah, but isn’t this a bit strange?”

The umbrella, the lamp, and Yonesaki Hiro all turned toward me.

Hm, that caught his attention more than I thought. I just don’t get what makes kids tick.

“I mean, the fallen trees and broken walls are scattered across the village from one side to the other, right?”

“What about it? That just shows how far the Oomukade’s rampage has spread. No one else has that much strength.”

“I heard they found centipede bite marks. Doesn’t that settle it?”

“But,” I added. “How does an Oomukade gain its strength?”

“Isn’t that obvious? One hit from its giant body would bring down a house or even a castle, so…”

After complaining so much, the lantern trailed off.

Yes.

“The Oomukade is big. Even if this one isn’t big enough to wrap around a mountain, it has to be way bigger than a Zashiki Warashi or Yuki Onna. You’re saying that deadly Youkai travelled from one end of the village to another, spreading destruction on the way? Then someone would have seen it somewhere. But I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“The only thing anyone has found is destruction seemingly caused by an Oomukade,” muttered the lantern. “No one has seen the Youkai itself.”

Yonesaki Hiro then cut in.

“Then maybe this wasn’t done by an Oomukade.”

“No! On the way here, I heard the villagers talking. The bite marks and leg scratches on the broken support were definitely from a centipede. A human could never do that!!” The umbrella opened and closed as he spoke. “And the stories about an Oomukade’s size vary quite a lot. That vagueness means its size isn’t fixed. It’s possible it can change its size.”

“That’s right,” added the lantern. “If it can shrink itself, it could sneak around, destroy things, and hide itself again. This is very dangerous!”

“…”

They had a point. If it could change its size, my doubts were meaningless.

Still…

“But why would the Oomukade sneak around like that?”

“Eh? Because it doesn’t want to be noticed, right?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” I immediately responded. “Youkai can’t be accused of a crime even if they kill people. And since the Oomukade can eat other Youkai, it won’t be punished by other Youkai either. If it was causing trouble, it wouldn’t need to hide. It would show up without hiding and leave without hiding. So why didn’t it do that?”

“Ukh…”

“B-but some humans are even more frightening than Youkai!”

Oh, do you mean people like Hyakki Yakou?

“If it was afraid of people like that, why would it cause so much trouble in the first place?”

“Ah.”

“It would take the risk if it has a reason worth doing so, but is destroying wooden walls and solar power generators really that important? What does that accomplish? None of this is making sense.”

Of course, I had no obligation to side with a Youkai I'd never met.

But a few things were bothering me.

Was there really an Oomukade here? And if there was, was it involved in this destruction?

And whether it was the Oomukade or just someone making it look that way, what was it supposed to accomplish?

What would anyone gain from knocking down trees and destroying walls?

And most importantly, the Okuri-Suzume had said Yonesaki Hiro was in trouble. It had said an Oomukade was after him. That Youkai warned of danger, so that wouldn't be a lie. In which case, what connection was there between Yonesaki Hiro and the Oomukade?

Was there an Oomukade here or not?

Was the Oomukade involved in this or not?

The current situation was a combination of those four possibilities, but with the Okuri-Suzume's "prophecy", I knew the answer would ultimately lead to an Oomukade harming Yonesaki Hiro. So how did this all fit together to reach that answer? Even if I had cheated and learned the final answer ahead of time, if I misread the situation leading up to it, it was still possible I could fail to stop it.

What a pain.

"?"

Yonesaki Hiro tilted his head and looked up at me.

To be honest, I had no real reason to get too involved with this kid, but since Youkai had no rights, their testimony could not be used in court, and they could not be charged with crimes, I couldn't just call the police and leave this with them.

Which meant I had to figure out what was happening in the village whether it involved an Oomukade or not. And until I had enough information to get my mind working and figure out what would happen next, I had to run around gathering that information.

I was beginning to seriously hope people wouldn't start calling me the Youkai Detective.

Part 8 (Yonesaki Hiro)

I went back home with the umbrella and lantern.

My home was a used goods store and would fix just about anything except for electronics. It could be a broken rice bowl, a paulownia dresser, a stained hanging scroll, a pocket watch, or anything else. That was why we had a lot of "object" Youkai like the umbrella and lantern.

The house itself was a Youkai called a Mayoiga.

“I’m hoooome.”

I called out as I opened the front door and a bunch of different furniture approached. There was a tea table, a different kind of lantern, a pot, and even a teapot. Just like in an American anime (Were they called cartoons?), they shook like gelatin and the tea table and chair’s legs easily bent to move them around.

“Hiro-chan!”

“Welcome home, Hiro-chan!!”

“For a snack, there’s a donut made from pancake batter! It has plenty of caramel sauce and chocolate sauce!!”

I removed my shoes and walked down the hall with the furniture following me around. Lots of eyes appeared and blinked on the sliding doors and I saw a translucent humanoid figure peering out from behind a folding screen, but none of them meant any harm.

I washed my hands in the bathroom, rubbed my eyes, and felt the itching in my fingertip growing. It felt like the pinky was having difficulty bending. I tried to remember where the bug bite medicine was.

It must have not been able to wait because a table approached from the kitchen carrying a donut on a plate. It couldn’t get through the door, so it got caught.

“Ahh, Hiro-chan, Hiro-chaaan!”

I dried my hands and approached the lamenting table.

As I had the table back up from the doorway it could never fit through, grabbed the donut, and took a bite, the plate spoke up.

“It seems we have a newcomer.”

“A newcomer?”

“It’s a Fuguruma Youbi. Your mother is looking over it in the workshop. It’s an antique, so it should be an amazing Youkai.”

Fuguruma? What kind of tool is that? I wondered with a tilt of the head.

I didn’t want to get in the way of my parents’ work, so I decided to watch some TV with the furniture. I used the remote to flip between the cable TV channels, but most of the news was about Tokyo and most of the dramas were set there. It seemed so far away.

“Medical Camp in Nakano, Tokyo, has gained some recent attention due to a capital injection from the major distance education company Ganesha, but the consumer living center seems worried about the rise in anonymous data related to Medical Camp’s unique disconnection education theory.”

Hmm.

TV was directed at housewives in the evening, so it wasn’t that interesting. Nothing stood out to me. I checked around and finally found a show for someone like me.

“Are even idols moving from TV to online videos? New music videos get over thirty million views in just twenty four hours and a fourteen-year-old’s tweets can affect stock prices! This middle school esper girl is all the rage right now! It’s PSI_ver_RAIN!!”

The buzzer indicating a visitor rang, so I placed my half eaten donut on the plate and headed to the front door. A girl of about my height stood there in a kimono.

However, she was definitely a Youkai.

Based on the aroma wafting from her, she was a Furutsubaki.

She had to be way, way older than my grandma.

“I’m here to pick up the item we left here.”

“?”

“Is the pocket watch left under the name Jinnai fixed yet?”

She was blunt and hard to understand, but I checked around and did find a pocket watch labelled “Jinnai”. I handed it and the memo from my grandpa to the Furutsubaki.

“Um, this says the mainspring was broken, so he replaced it. It won’t be worth as much as an antique, but it says to forgive him.”

“That’s fine. The Jinnai grandfather received it from his father as a coming of age present, so all that matters is that it runs.”

The Furutsubaki took the pocket watch that had a chain attached.

I assumed she didn’t need anything more, but she suddenly started sniffing.

And then she stepped toward me.

Th-that’s really close!! A girl’s face is only ten centimeters away!!

“You’re in love, aren’t you?”

“Eh? Weh!?”

“A Furutsubaki has the ability to seduce humans, so we can understand their feelings. But be careful. The scent sticking to your arm is a detestable one…no, a monstrous one.”

“…”

“But I am also jealous. The standard way for a Youkai to repay someone is to marry them, but I’m not sure what to do with mine since half the time he’s filled with lust and half the time he’s completely clueless.”

The Furutsubaki seemed to lose interest because she turned away. Without looking back, she left with the pocket watch in hand.

The name Jinnai reminded me of that older boy who seemed to be investigating something.

That reminded me of the uproar over the Oomukade.

I thought back to that comment about a detestable or monstrous scent, and worry filled my chest.

I felt like something was happening without my knowledge.

Once this day ended, the next day would arrive. And then I would be able to see my friends and acquaintances again. However, whatever this was felt like it would overturn that basic fact.

For a while, I thought blankly about what the Furutsubaki had said, but…

“Hiro-chan.”

“What is it, Hiro-chan?”

“It seems our master is in love with someone. (Worry, worry.)”

“Umbrella!! We must not interfere with an issue of succession. Keep this a secret from the head of the family!”

I quickly turned around and the furniture peering out from the cracked-open door scattered like baby spiders.

Part 9 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I always got needlessly excited when we had Salisbury steak for dinner, but that had to be something imprinted on me as a child. And there was no stopping it when they had a fried egg on top. I knew I had to have a really cheap heart to be won over by something like this, but there was nothing I could do.

“Can I really win Jinnai Shinobu’s heart with something like this?”

“Ram-chan said so, so it has to be true. Autofocus’s bonus magazine gives twenty ways to ensure your love comes true.”

The Yuki Onna and the Furutsubaki (small) were already whispering some dangerous things in the living room. They had some kind of fashion magazine opened up on the floor. I had never seen any of those magazine romance questionnaires hit the mark, but they were free to believe it if they wanted to.

“Mh, how about this? ‘A Super Simple Ice Bath☆The Low Temperature Diet!!’.”

“It also mentions the ‘stranded on a snowy mountain’ effect which outdoes even the suspension bridge effect. Mhh!!”

Uh, oh!! That writer probably just wrote some random hundred-word article, but I can feel my death approaching already! I need to get out of here before disaster strikes! There’s also that Oomukade stuff, so I was already thinking about heading out to check around the village tonight!!

“Now, then.”

“Shinobu, why are you grinning with a flashlight this late at night? It’s creeping me out. Are you on your way to drill a hole in the wall of your school’s shower room or locker room?”

“What!? I haven’t even snuck out yet and I’ve already been caught!?”

If she told my dad or grandpa, I could easily get locked in the storage shed, so I explained everything to the Zashiki Warashi to get her on my side. The Good-for-Nothing Youkai in a red yukata gave a sigh of utter exasperation.

“Seemingly meaningless destruction, an Oomukade no one’s seen, and a warning from an Okuri-Suzume saying that Oomukade is going to attack Yonesaki Hiro? … Sigh. Shinobu, that’s not enough to know an Oomukade is really sneaking around at night. In fact, is one involved at all?”

“That’s the question. But if it’s willing to attack during the day, it might be out at night, too. And if it doesn’t show up at all, I’ll know it’s only showing up during the day. I just have to narrow down the possibilities like that.”

Afterwards, I snuck out of the thatch-roof house without telling my parents.

You might think I was surrounded by silence, but the night was actually really noisy with all the different crickets everywhere. The growth of brand-name crops may have been directly related to light because streetlights had been intentionally excluded from the farm roads. The area was filled with a thick, ink-like darkness.

The night was long, but I had to decide where to check first.

I didn’t know if there really was an Oomukade in the village or where it would attack next if it was. Even in a small village, could I really find anything by searching around randomly?

“Well, it’s not like I could come up with any good ideas anyway.”

I started by checking on the sites of the damage.

I checked the roadside solar power generator, the wall of the paddy pump shed, the house’s fence, and the large tree near the candy shop.

They all looked like they had been hit by a truck or by demolition equipment.

“Is this the centipede bite mark?”

The fallen tree had been moved to the side of the road for the time being, so I checked the break. Prepared to see some disturbing things, I used my cellphone to search some bug-obsessed sites and this did resemble the “bite marks” I found there. Although this mark was much, much bigger.

So was it really an Oomukade?

But at the same time, I tilted my head.

As mentioned during the day, the damage was scattered throughout the village instead of focused in one area. Moving from one to the other like this required going back and forth through the village.

And…

“There are cameras, aren’t there?” I muttered as I looked up at the traffic signal.

Intellectual Village grapes cost thirty thousand yen a bunch, so there were surveillance cameras everywhere to protect those brand-name crops from boars and vegetable thieves.

I didn’t know how big this Oomukade was, but if it had gone back and forth through the village, it would’ve been caught by that network of cameras somewhere.

Or did it have some way of keeping itself from being seen, like the Okuri-Suzume?

A normal Oomukade was not invisible.

If it had gained that ability, this wasn’t just a Youkai acting on its own. Someone would have had to forcibly twist the Youkai’s traits and swapped them out to create the desired effect.

In other words, a human would be involved.

I hadn’t considered it since there was no apparent profit or planning, but could this be a criminal Package?

“…”

I instinctually turned off the flashlight.

It was as if I had realized how dangerous it was to reveal my location.

At the same time, a Package required dozens or even hundreds of people. I doubted that many people would gather together to knock over a tree on the side of the road.

Had they messed up the assembly?

Or was there some great benefit still hidden?

And how was it all related to Yonesaki Hiro?

No amount of thinking was going to reveal the answer and that meant I didn’t have enough information. With that in mind, I raised my head again.

“…?”

I saw a figure moving unsteadily down the dark farm road.

However, it was quite small. They probably only reached my chest or stomach.

And then I saw what it was.

Part 10 (Yonesaki Hiro)

The lights were out as I sat up in my futon. A mixture of itching and pain crawled across my right hand. The itching that had begun at the end of my pinky had slowly spread, but I didn't have time to worry about that now.

My blanket and pillow moved on their own.

"What is it, Hiro-chan?"

"What is it, young master? Can you not sleep?"

It would be impossible to leave without anyone noticing. I felt a weight in my chest when I lied and said I had to use the bathroom, but I left my room in my pajamas all the same. I walked down the dark hallway and made my way to the front door. That was enough for the furniture to fidget, but they seemed to be letting me do as I pleased.

"My master, you're going, aren't you?"

"Are you going, Hiro-chan?"

"Yes."

Unlike the older Jinnai boy, my way of getting to the answer was probably cheating.

Instead of gathering the pieces of the puzzle one by one and calculating it all out, I reached the answer through vague intuition.

I began to make a strange connection between Ranzono-san's odd behavior and the uproar about the Oomukade.

The older Jinnai boy might settle everything eventually like that other time, but that scared me this time.

I was afraid getting my peaceful life back would mean Ranzono-san would disappear.

The lantern and umbrella were waiting at the front door.

"If you're going out at night, it wouldn't hurt to have a light."

"As an umbrella, it is my duty to protect you from any disaster that might pour down upon you."

I nodded, put on my shoes, and grabbed the two of them.

I then opened the front door and ran out into the dark outside world.

Part 11 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The figure swaying along the pitch black farm road was probably only in elementary school, so it was clearly unusual for them to be out this late. I was too far away to tell what they were wearing or even if they were a boy or a girl.

Why was it I didn't immediately turn on the flashlight and shine it on them?

An invisible tingling tension stopped me from taking that normal action.

“…”

What was this?

What was I so afraid of?

It was an issue of the atmosphere. This was clearly a small child, but they didn’t seem at all harmless. Unpleasant sweat poured down my back as if I’d spotted a tiger, a bear, or another large carnivore in the mountains.

Meanwhile, the small form made a turn at an intersection dividing up the paddy fields, so it wasn’t like they were approaching me after noticing me. I hesitated for a moment, but I decided to follow them.

Their pace varied and their head swayed back and forth, so they didn’t seem to be looking in any set direction. Did they even have a destination in mind?

As if to answer that question, the figure came to a sudden stop.

It felt like they had been on their way somewhere but had given up.

We were near some vending machines set up next to the farm road. I was pretty sure they had recently been put in at the request of some people who had succumbed to heatstroke during the residual heat of September. Five vending machines for drinks and bread were lined up below a metal roof to keep off the rain.

Just like with an automatic door, the fluorescent lights were rigged to show off the products when someone approached.

When I saw what was illuminated by those bright white lights, I just about screamed.

They were only between 130 and 140 centimeters tall. Their frame alone wasn’t enough to tell if they were a boy or a girl, but they were likely a girl since they were wearing a skirt. She may have been aiming for a kind of gap appeal because she wore a sports brand track suit jacket with a frilly miniskirt. I could guess this was probably an elementary student.

The problem was the face.

The neck up had transformed into a giant centipede with countless squirming legs.

What?

What…in the hell…is that!!!???

I stared in shock as the head – the centipede – stretched out. The bizarre movement was like an even more grotesque version of a Rokurokubi.

“Oh…oh…”

I couldn’t tell you where it was coming from, but it gave a strangely distorted groan. Before long, the number of centipedes grew. It looked like a giant tropical flower now.

“O-oh….oh…
ohhhh

“Do you have a Package that lets you fuse an Oomukade with your bodies?”

“Heh heh. What if we do?”

I heard a footstep in the grass. No, it was more than one. When I switched on my flashlight and pointed it all around me, I saw twenty to thirty children surrounding me on the farm road and the already harvested paddies.

“Why would you do that? And wait. Who put it together!? Assembling a Package takes dozens or even hundreds of grown adults with specialized knowledge!”

“If I said we’d done it ourselves, would it hurt your pride as a high schooler?”

And more importantly…

She was shining a bright light on me, but what was it? She wasn’t holding a flashlight!

The chestnut hair girl seemed to be their leader and she swung her small right hand horizontally

A sticky sound followed and the arm transformed from the shoulder down. It became a giant tentacle-like object made of countless intertwined centipedes. The light came from the centipedes’ legs. They were glowing like a torch’s flame. No, that wasn’t all. I could see some irregular movement inside her clothes, too. The movement inside the pants below her skirt was completely ignoring the joints of a leg.

Was this to gain physical strength? To gain a special power? To become something beyond human?

Whatever the reason, I couldn’t imagine what kind of mind could accept something like this with a smile. Nevertheless, the rest of the kids surrounding me also transformed their arms and legs into centipedes. They all showed off their strange tentacles with some spreading wide to either side like wings and some hanging down around their neck like jellyfish tentacles. However, that was not the problem.

Each time the many centipedes wriggled, a gust of wind blew out. It was said the Oomukade could control storms, so were they controlling the wind or the air pressure? And the winds they produced seemed to have different effects. Some cut, some crushed, some dried out the plants, and some shook the dirt and rocks.

And this was not just a lone madman like with a serial killer. They all shared the same insane obsession.

“I’m sorry, mister.”

The chestnut hair girl spoke while her many “legs” wriggled about.

“We still haven’t reached the end. And until we do, we can’t have anyone getting in our way. So I’m sorry…but we’ll have to silence you.”

At that moment, a thick presence almost like an invisible wall rushed toward me.

I frantically looked around, but I was completely surrounded and there was nowhere to run. And based on the destruction I’d seen around the village, those centipedes had enough power to break a thick tree truck or bring down a shed’s wall. Would

they crush me under their giant bodies or would they cut through me with their gusts of wind? I didn't know the actual method, but this was no different from having cars rushing toward me from all three hundred sixty degrees.

I didn't even have time to think it was pathetic I was losing to elementary school kids.

Pure fear rose from my gut and I could tell my legs weren't working properly.

It was just like running out onto the road and seeing a truck's bumper filling my vision.

And then something struck me in the side.

An unpleasant sound burst out, my feet immediately left the ground, and I flew through the air.

Part 12 (Jinnai Shinobu)

My mind was sent flying.

A neverending floating sensation came over me.

I even forgot how to link my memories in a sequential order.

"…?"

But once I questioned why I still wasn't dead, I finally realized what had happened.

A centipede had indeed hit me, but I wasn't dead. I wasn't even scratched.

The centipede that had rushed toward me first was not one of the kids led by that chestnut hair girl.

"*Oomukade!!*"

I heard the girl's shrill voice from the darkness behind me.

"*Why are you getting in our way!? We're your friends!!*"

The giant creature looked more like a dragon than a bug.

Countless legs carried it across the already harvested rice paddies.

Its head was reminiscent of the front of a train and its extremely bizarre jaws held my body.

It almost seemed to be taking me away from the children.

"Are you…the original Oomukade!?"

"How much of this do you understand?"

“There’s been a lot of damage caused by centipedes in the village, but it was actually done by those kids from the city and they’re only drawing out your power. Is that right?”

“I will give that fifty points. That is merely the result and you have yet to reach the true issue. I just hope we can find somewhere quiet to speak.”

“Even though you’re on those city kids’ side?”

“*Because* I am on their side. Do you think I want them to be using my power and traits?”

The Oomukade said nothing more.

Footsteps that sounded like they were cutting through the grass and the low rumbling of violent gusts of wind were enough to know we had several pursuers. We were moving faster than your average car, but they were keeping up. I could see quite a few lights following us like will-o’-the-wisps. I no longer felt any inclination to shine my flashlight on them. I did not want to know what change had come over their bodies to pull this off.

“Looks like we need to lose Sachi’s group first.”

Sachi? Is that one of their names?

No, more importantly…

“Wait a second. What’s that light? On the road through the paddy field!!”

I immediately found the answer to my own question.

This light was much softer than my flashlight. I was pretty sure it was a Lantern Obake and a small form was vaguely visible in its light.

“I do not recognize that child. He must not be part of Sachi’s group.”

“That’s Yonesaki Hiro. He’s a kid from the village!!”

This was bad. The chestnut hair girl had said she would kill anyone who saw them. Yonesaki Hiro would be no exception. His eyes opened wide when he saw me and it was obvious what would happen if the centipedes caught him.

This is dangerous.

This is so dangerous, but I have to say it, dammit!!

“Oomukade, don’t worry about me! Leave me around here and take that kid with you!!”

“But…”

“Hurry!! I can manage on my own. The umbrella and lantern with him can’t stand up to the power of a Youkai that can eat dragon gods!!”

He hesitated a little.

But then the jaws holding me loosened and I fell toward the paddies that seemed to be quickly flowing by below me. I clenched my teeth to bear with the pain as I rolled again and again and I heard the Oomukade speak as it lifted its head like a cobra.

“Don’t die. I will need your help for Sachi’s sake.”

It didn’t wait for me to reply to or question that.

The Oomukade whipped up the wind and used the spring-like power of its entire body to jump over and collect Yonesaki Hiro. I somehow managed to get up and ran in a different direction.

For better or for worse, the kids seemed to pursue the much more noticeable Oomukade. I could see the leg lights they were using as illumination and the blowing wind heading in that direction. This was not quite what I had expected, but Yonesaki Hiro wouldn’t be killed that easily if the original Oomukade was helping him.

But what was I supposed to do? If I returned to my thatch-roof house, I would just be attacked there. There were at least a few dozen of them, but if every single kid from the city was involved, the number jumped to over one hundred. I was outnumbered, but they were relying on the occult. Since they were using a Package built around that Oomukade, I only had to destroy that system to rob them of their power like I had thrown a breaker. Once they lost the centipede power, they were nothing but powerless kids. It didn’t look like there was any other way of escaping this alive.

“What do I need to do that?”

I needed information and time to think, so I decided to hide somewhere or hole up somewhere.

I looked around and spotted a large building.

The school, huh?

That would be better than standing in the middle of the paddies like a scarecrow, so I pulled my aching body along to run there.

When I got closer, I realized it wasn’t my usual high school. It was the elementary school I had graduated from long ago. But this was no time to be picky. It was all over if I was caught, so I climbed the metal fence, ran across the schoolyard, and ran up to the entranceway of the high-tech wooden school building that had air conditioning and internet access.

I didn’t have time to check whether it was locked.

I swung down my flashlight to break the door’s glass and I unlocked it from inside. That might have sounded an alarm at the security company, but that was actually a good thing.

I stepped inside.

Schools could be frightening places at night because it felt like a ghost was going to show up, but this was hardly the time to worry about that.

But then I heard the high-pitched sound of shattering glass coming from somewhere else.

“Don’t tell me they’re already here!”

I felt a squeezing in my chest, but the person who broke through the hallway window was Yonesaki Hiro who had been held in the Oomukade’s jaws. The umbrella and lantern accompanied him.

The original Oomukade itself shrunk in size to only a few meters long and entered the hallway.

“Wh-what is going on!? When did this village turn into a kodoku jar!?”

“There’s nothing we can do! If only we could contact the mortar or armor back home.”

The umbrella and lantern were left to speak back and forth as the Oomukade spoke up.

“This is not good. Sachi intentionally guided us here.”

“What do you mean? What does Ranzono-san have to do with this?”

Yonesaki Hiro sounded nervous and the Oomukade twisted around toward him.

“Sachi comes from the city, so she has never been in the mountains at night. She also doesn’t know much about this village, so she probably decided she would have the easiest time in the school because it is built a lot like those in the city. She intends to finish you all off here.”

“City schools and rural ones aren’t exactly the same. Intellectual Villages rely on online shopping so much that we’d be isolated if a typhoon or landslide cut off the road. We have far more shelter equipment,” I cut in. “The elementary school is like the house of bricks from The Three Little Pigs. It has the toughest disaster infrastructure. There should be a large-scale tornado shelter underground. Do you think that steel door can hold up against them?”

“I doubt it. Centipedes burrow through the earth, so hiding underground would only be taking this onto Sachi’s home turf.”

“I see. But we should still be able to use it.”

I brushed a hand through my blond-dyed hair and asked about something more important.

“Sachi? Ranzono-san? To be honest, I don’t know that much about this situation, so can you explain how everyone’s involved in this? Otherwise, I can’t grasp the big picture of this Package.”

“Ranzono Sachi is the queen of her community. She stands at the top of every category around her: her class, her year, and her entire school.”

“She’s a girl from the city. She’s really smart. She’s athletic, she’s fashionable, she can play the piano, and she can cook. She works as a model and writer for a fashion magazine and middle schoolers around the world look up to her.”

“A fashion magazine?”

“It’s called Autofocus. You’ve never heard of it?”

A magazine for kids? Come to think of it, the Yuki Onna and the Furutsubaki (small) were looking at that.

The umbrella and lantern opened their large mouths and spoke.

“Ohh, I saw that too! It was filled with these weird things called barcodes and matrix codes!!”

“I heard it was originally a web magazine, but it was successful enough to head back to the original paper format. That made it feel more linked to the internet than absolutely necessary, though.”

I see. So that’s what this is about.

A model was one thing, but it was impossible for an elementary student to write for a magazine. Before even talking about talent or skills, the Labor Standards Act prevented them from working.

When it was only on the web, she had probably been treated as someone updating a blog as a hobby rather than a job. Just like the prize exchanges for pachinko parlors, they probably gave her some “allowance” in a somewhat separate place. They may have been working around those issues for the physical magazine, too.

More importantly…

“Autofocus, hm?”

“What about it?”

“Well… They were gathering attention by creating a dream team from well-known figures on the internet, but that means they were gathering people who they’d never even seen before, right? Nothing says all the harsh critics giving everything one star on review sites actually know what they’re talking about. They have to have seriously tried to recruit some kid claiming to be a well-known worker somewhere or, even worse, a bot that only posted automated text.”

I didn’t know if this had anything to do with the centipede Package, but I needed to get an idea of who Ranzono Sachi was since she seemed to be the mastermind.

For some reason, Yonesaki Hiro pouted his lips.

“That’s not what happened here. Ranzono-san really is, um, mature and fashionable. There’s no one else as, well, pretty in my class.”

“What?” I frowned. “Sorry, but are you seriously saying that?”

“Eh?”

He sounded confused, but that may have been because I sounded more exasperated than insulting.

“Just so you know, it’s only natural they look perfect and mature. After all, they’re Twelves.”

“What’s a Twelve?”

“Kasane_12 or Twelve for short. Simply put, it’s a kind of trick art used on people. If you place white paper and black paper next to each other and look at them from a distance, the white paper will look closer to you. They use tricks like that with the colors of their outfits to give the illusion of an hourglass figure and they use makeup and their hairstyle to make their face look smaller.”

The name of course was based on the traditional Japanese twelve-layer robe. But despite the designer’s intentions, the term was now mostly used as an insult. It was seen as a misogynistic fashion that made the girl look pretty by covering her in so much makeup and clothing that they could barely move.

“Her looks…are fake?”

Yonesaki Hiro was dumbfounded.

The Oomukade twisted awkwardly next to him and remained silent.

“It’s kind of like covering their entire body with a thin layer of special makeup. So if they get sweaty and the makeup comes off, it would apparently be far worse than losing an eyebrow. I’ve heard the perspective of their face would be thrown off and they would look something from a game of fukuwarai. They have to constantly check their face in a mirror, so it has to be a restrictive way to live.”

“I see. So that’s why she freaked out when I said something about her face.”

The boy seemed to remember something.

Hearing that, the Oomukade finally spoke again.

“That is why Sachi…no, all of the Kasane_12 children are doing this.”

“I still don’t see it. What do the centipedes have to do with special makeup?”

“It is possible the fear of becoming a centipede has been numbed by the centipede’s venom, but at the very least, Kasane_12 was the initial cause.”

The deadly Youkai said to eat even other Youkai sounded troubled.

“Here is a hypothetical situation for you. Kasane_12 optimizes their looks, but those looks will completely fall apart if it fails. Now, what if they did not what to do this themselves? What if it was forced onto them by their parents or other adults? Just how much pressure do you think they would be under then?”

“Ah.”

“People praise Sachi. They call her beautiful and they gather around her. …But that is not her true self. They are all looking at the false outer layer and none of them are truly looking at her, praising her, or showing any kind of concern for her. Isn’t that more than enough to destroy a growing personality?”

The girl and the centipede.

She was breaking the boundary between the beautiful and the ugly and mixing them together.

She hated and wanted to ruin what it was everyone praised about her.

The situation was slowly coming into focus.

Adults made Packages for simple money or fame, but this one was based on the values only held among these cornered kids.

“This is my fault,” confessed the Oomukade. “It was wrong of me to feel sorry for her. It was irresponsible to try to cheer her up. That was what placed the final crack in the dam of her heart which she was only just barely keeping in balance.”

Part 13 (Ranzono Sachi)

“Sachi-chan, why are you smiling?”

That casual comment led me to realize *my face was falling apart.*

I was not allowed to sweat carelessly, I was not allowed to shed tears carelessly, and I was not allowed to let the rain hit me carelessly. When I went outside, I always had to have a mirror on hand and I had to constantly check my face no matter where I was.

And I could not quit either.

My status and the expectations of me were still on the rise. No matter how much I told people I couldn’t do anymore, they kept pumping in more and more expectations. The higher I ended up, the greater the damage if I fell. There was no way I could land safely anymore. The expectations of my parents, my friends, my teachers, and even of complete strangers were just too heavy. A single mistake and I knew unbearable pain would press in on me.

I lived in a soft living hell, like being strangled by luxurious silk.

That was when I found it.

It was a spot of green seemingly cut off from the hustle and bustle of the city. It was the remains of a shrine that seemed almost buried by the buildings around it. It was like the secret place in the donkey ears story.

I found the Oomukade there.

No, a Tsuchigumo and Nue were there too. The Youkai were all so strange looking.

To be honest, I was scared at first.

But despite not looking remotely human, they didn’t seem to care, joked with each other, and worked together to pick the fruits in the trees. I was jealous when I saw them.

I didn’t take long to start fitting in.

In that world, your looks didn’t matter. Those friends would look at who you were on the inside.

I had gained something that should have been normal. I felt like I was regaining myself after I had started to fade away. They truly did save my life.

And yet…

“Sachi! Why would you get anywhere near those creepy things!?”

Something set foot into my world.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Sachi-chan. We’ll call a famous expert for you.”

Something brought unwelcome help into my world.

“It looks like they are affecting her. But not to worry. I can handle this easily.”

Something approached with a smile after catching the scent of money.

If the Oomukade, Tsuchigumo, and Nue had seriously resisted him, they could have torn that fraud of a medium to pieces, but they didn’t.

When I arrived at the usual place, gasping for breath, nothing was left. They had not even wanted to harm the person coming for them, so they had given up their home. That was how it seemed to me.

But…

But…

But…

I simply could not allow it to end like that.

What had the Oomukade done? What was wrong with a Tsuchigumo being ugly? Was a Nue’s inhuman appearance any reason to proudly rob them of everything they had? They understood human feelings, they could communicate using words, and they had enough of a heart to care for even those who opposed them, so why did they have to be treated like that?

What was beauty?

What did it mean for the beautiful to exterminate the ugly?

If that logic actually held up, then it was obvious who should truly be exterminating who.

Everything needed to become the same.

Everyone needed to become centipedes.

Humans were not beautiful or ugly. It only came down to whether they hid it or not. In that case, I just had to drag it all out into the light. If everyone looked the same, we would finally be able to compare who we were on the inside. If we did that, we humans were sure to realize just how inferior we were.

If I had lost sight of my true self inside the cocoon of the manmade Kasane_12 and I had become a mere doll, I may never have had these feelings. I would probably have

become a disturbing empty shell that only gave the answers that would delight the adults and live up to my parents and teachers' expectations.

But I had regained myself. Those kind Youkai had brought me back.

So I couldn't bear it. I would use myself for their sake.

I would use myself up to the very end.

Part 14 (Jinnai Shinobu)

"It comes down to an issue of affinity. As humans grow, they come to hate bugs. There is nothing cruel about it; it is completely normal. Sachi just so happened to develop that later than others. That allowed her to fit in with us, but the adults around her would not allow it. I had predicted she would be pulled away from us, but it seemed to be quite a shock to her. Her hatred did not die down, so it continued to quietly burn within her and she ended up building this Package with the other children."

The Oomukade's story was strange, but it was not that I couldn't understand it.

That may have been because I lived in an Intellectual Village full of Youkai.

Then again, I didn't exactly like giant spiders or roaches. If a rhinoceros beetle was flipped over and I saw its soft belly, I would flinch back. It didn't feel quite the same when I could speak with it like with the Oomukade, though. If you could tell them to go away and they would, there wasn't anything to be afraid of.

"I had no direct contact with the children other than Sachi. After we left, she must have spread her story to others with similar worries. Unfortunately, the ones who haven't seen us probably had an easier time glorifying us in their imagination. We aren't creatures meant to be looked up to after all."

The Oomukade had said it had been wrong.

It had said cheering her up had been irresponsible.

But…

"I think you have that a little wrong."

"?"

"It's true you messed up, but that doesn't mean the beginning was wrong. The problem was the ending where you vanished without saying a thing and left it all unsettled. Accepting Ranzono Sachi when she was in such a bind was clearly the right thing to do. Who knows what might have happened to her otherwise. It scares me just to think about it."

"At the very least, this would not have happened to her."

"You'd rather she was a soulless teacher's pet? She might have even hung herself. I'm betting you took on the seeds of this trouble because you saw those possibilities in her future."

“…”

“If ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are the only options, then you pulled the lever toward ‘right’. You did something you can be proud of. And if Ranzono Sachi still hasn’t been saved, it means she derailed from the ‘right’ track. All you have to do is help her recover. If the train is brought back on track and carries her to the goal, then this will all work out. That’s the best possible option, right?”

The Oomukade remained silent for a while.

But finally, it looked between me and Yonesaki Hiro and dropped its raised head. To put that another way, it bowed toward us.

“I must ask you again. …Will you help me save Sachi...and the rest of those children? I need to save them before they cross the point of no return and really do kill someone.”

I didn’t even need to answer. I had been the one trying to get this going.

For some reason, Yonesaki Hiro held out his small clenched fist, so I lightly clenched my own fist and pressed it against his.

That was when the umbrella asked a question.

“But could those small children really assemble a Package? They might have the dozens of people necessary, but still.”

“Those children had another worry besides Kasane_12. It is commonly known as a manmade genius project. A business that acts more like a seminar than a cram school artificially remakes the structure of their brains. I believe the business was known as Medical Camp.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. That’s the thing they call trauma disconnection, isn’t it? They apply pain to close off the unnecessary synapse connections, *leaving only the connections for academics and other lessons*. It’s been showing up on talk shows and the online news, so it’s more of a gray area than anything fully illegal.”

If what I’d heard on TV was accurate, the man who founded the business was constantly moving between countless different businesses. He had made all sorts of crazy seminars and cram schools that would drag kids in and lock them in bomb shelters as “punishment” if they stopped showing up.

“I had thought Ranzono-san was amazing because she was great at school, sports, fashion, music, and cooking, but it seemed strange to me,” said Yonesaki Hiro, another kid. “How did she fit all that into only twenty-four hours a day? …But I was wrong. There was no way she could fit it all in.”

Those children had been fully remade, inside and out, for the convenience and vanity of the adults.

They were robbed of any sense of self and were displayed by their parents as a medal or a trophy.

The Oomukade’s group had definitely been right to accept Ranzono Sachi. If things had continued without their intervention, she would have met a fate worse than becoming a creepy stuffed human trophy.

“That means they gathered their genius minds together and used them to assemble a Package better than any adults could have.”

“In that case…” I chose my words carefully. “This Package turns people into centipedes, so the core has to be the Oomukade. You must have had your power and traits stolen without even knowing it. But the components have to be something else. The Package would have been assembled from things those city kids could get their hands on.”

“But since they’re from the city, wouldn’t the core be outside the village?”

“Even if it is, the leader must have some kind of controller. Otherwise, one of the other kids could overthrow her. …It must be really close by. This is the elementary school, so we might find a hint here. What would Ranzono Sachi be free to bring in and use here?”

As I wondered about that, I also went over the traits of the Oomukade at the source of the Package.

–The Oomukade is a large centipede Youkai.

But it wasn’t explained why it was so large or violent.

–The Oomukade can eat other Youkai such as a clan of dragon gods.

But it wasn’t explained whether it ate them due to hunger, hatred, or whatever else.

–The Oomukade is immune to normal blades, but it is weak to weapons with human spit on them.

But it wasn’t explained why human spit was effective.

Those unknowns were very important. One could substitute in any parameters they wanted when assembling the Package. A clear weakness made a safety device easier to add in, so this was actually a pretty easy to use species.

“Um, since it’s Ranzono-san, wouldn’t it be this?”

“?”

I heard a rustling sound as Yonesaki Hiro pulled out a magazine larger than A4 size.

That’s Autofocus, but…huh? Where did he pull that from?

“You can find them all over the school. It’s a big fad right now. This one was on top of the shoe lockers.”

“That helped us out too. Heh heh.”

First the Yuki Onna and now the lantern. The magazine seemed pretty popular with Youkai.

I placed the magazine on the floor and flipped through it with my flashlight in one hand. Despite being a fashion magazine, it barely had any photos. It was all barcodes and AR marker and it was real pain having to hold up my cellphone every time.

“That’s some odd taste. Well, maybe she was forced to do it for work.”

“Eh? But…”

“Did you think a model in a fashion magazine was some kind of god that’s always right? These are really just fancy banner advertisements. She wears the clothes from the makers and brands affiliated with the editors so they can sell as much clothing as possible. That’s how this is set up. They don’t introduce things because they’re the latest trend; they introduce them to *make them* the latest trend. Apparently, some

magazines make more from the money the clothing makers give them than from selling the magazine.”

“…”

“If I use a more modern word like ‘affiliate’, do you get why Autofocus would recruit well-known online figures? You can reference the magazines if you want, but don’t just accept what they say at face value.”

Including Ranzono Sachi, they had about twenty dedicated models of various types.

They were all wearing some pretty forced outfits that were supposed to make you want to click the banner ad for a shopping site, but Ranzono Sachi seemed a little different from the rest.

There was definitely something odd about her.

While the other models were clearly playing their part with dollar signs in their eyes, I couldn’t sense any obvious benefit for her. I couldn’t figure out why she was wearing those mismatched clothes.

“I don’t believe you.”

Yonesaki Hiro pouted his lips a little. It looked like he had more of a problem with me saying these things about Ranzono Sachi than with the facts themselves.

“Ranzono-san really is the center of her school. She’s in some unreachable place like the distant moon and everyone wanted to hear the things she says. You can say those things all you want, but she still seems perfectly mature to me.”

I just about told him distinguishing between what you wanted to think and the truth was the sign of maturity, but then I froze up.

Wait a second.

“The Oomukade is an enlarged centipede. Its threat grows with its size.”

“What about it?” asked the Oomukade.

“And Ranzono Sachi’s group is turning their own bodies into centipedes. They’re turning themselves into a special being that grows more powerful the larger it grows.”

I pointed at the magazine on the floor and the umbrella gave an “ah” of realization.

“She’s a model and writer for a fashion magazine. She’s an unreachable existence like Kaguya-hime on the distant moon. …She is in elementary school just like our master, but she’s also a celebrity that with a clear line drawn between her and the other children.”

“They two fit together. The Oomukade is an enlarged centipede and that city girl has enlarged her status with the magazine. Do you think Ranzono Sachi used Autofocus *to make herself seem bigger* and therefore combine with the Oomukade?”

“B-but…” The lantern cut in. “What about the other centipedes with her? I believe she is the only one directly connected to Autofocus. How did the centipede power infect those other children as well?”

“Did they reference Autofocus? Did they read it? No, that isn’t it. They have to make themselves look bigger. There has to be a trigger for that. If it applies to more than just the actual writer…”

I had no guarantee here and we had not time to gather evidence.

I could only present my theories.

“There has to be a condition for her gallery to make themselves look bigger. Are they doing it through Ranzono Sachi? Did they follow her fashion to stand on the forefront of their own classes? Yes, they didn’t question those mismatched outfits, chose their clothes on baseless information, and felt a misguided pride in it all.”

Otherwise, Ranzono Sachi wouldn’t have any reason to wear those mismatched outfits in the magazine.

If her success through Autofocus was the trigger, then she would have worn proper outfits. That would have been the way to increase the number of centipedes.

“Wait,” said the Oomukade. “If that is the case…”

“Yes. The centipede transformations won’t be limited to her class or year. This might have spread throughout Japan. A lot of them are probably hiding it because they’re afraid of revealing something so grotesque.”

Yonesaki Hiro seemed bothered by something and he hid his right hand behind his back.

That caught my interest, but I didn’t have time to ask about it.

I heard a clattering like a sudden downpour striking the roof. Each individual sound was a leg and they spread through the darkness like a ripple. Knowing they were approaching from outside the window was enough for a chill to run down my spine. Storm-like winds blew against the glass and several points of light turned toward us.

It had to be a group of centipedes large enough to envelop the surface, but I didn’t have the guts to shine the flashlight toward it. In fact, I couldn’t imagine how a human being could transform into something that would make noises like that.

“Ranzono-san and the others are here!”

“What should we do?” asked the Oomukade. “As sturdy as this school is, it has a lot of windows and they will completely fill the building at this rate.”

“W-we need to hide somewhere!”

“No,” I cut in. “Just running isn’t enough. Oomukade, Ranzono Sachi shouldn’t think you’re a definite enemy yet. That means you can maintain an ambiguous position without running or hiding. Can you stay out here as a scout?”

“I can, but wouldn’t I be more useful to help you fight?”

“No. …Yonesaki, right? You come with me. I need to know the layout of the school. I don’t want to find out they’ve made additions or changes since I graduated.”

“Wh-what are you going to do?” asked the umbrella while glancing out the dark window again and again.

“I’m going to spit on an arrowhead.”

“What?”

“That’s how you defeat an Oomukade. But now that we know how Ranzono Sachi has set up the process using the fashion magazine, I obviously don’t mean it literally. If I get my hands on that arrowhead, we might be able to turn this around.”

“What exactly should I do to help Sachi and the other children?” asked the Oomukade.

“I’m going to do something, but afterwards, I want you to see if they’re *using cellphones*. You can tell us by… yeah, let’s do it like a fake medium. For yes, do nothing. For no, go on enough of a rampage for the noise and shaking to reach us. That’s what I’ll use to decide what to do next.”

Our opponents were getting close. If they rushed into the school building before I could take action, it was all over. I didn’t have time to explain everything, so we parted ways with the Oomukade and ran through the dark building.

“Where are we going?”

“That’s what I need to ask about. Do they still have a device in the faculty room that looks like a giant fridge?”

“A fridge?”

“Intellectual Villages are reliant on online shopping, so we’d dry up in no time if a typhoon or landslide blocked off the road through the mountains. So just in case, we have ample disaster infrastructure. Especially in the community center, the schools, and anywhere else a lot of people can take shelter inside. …And the elementary school is the best of the best. It has water, food, sleeping bags, and everything you need to sleep over here. I’m interested in one of those things.”

We didn’t have time to worry about locks, so I kicked down the door to the faculty room.

I pointed my flashlight at what was inside.

“An emergency wired communications server and a large-scale antenna tower. These are to maintain the communications infrastructure.”

Ranzono Sachi’s ability to make herself look big was reliant on the fashion magazine Autofocus. And Autofocus was filled with barcodes and AR markers, so you couldn’t tell what was inside just by looking at it.

She had to be using the magazine and the website together to gain allies from her fans around the country. With the support of those online friends, she thoroughly turned herself into a celebrity. For her, one hundred legs was nothing.

But if her communications were cut off, what would happen to Kaguya-hime on the moon? If she fell to the earth, she would be no different from any other child. Without her fans and online friends, she would be nothing but a human being. Wouldn't I be able to tear out her hundred legs then?

I opened the door to the switchboard and worked on it while I explained all that.

The umbrella groaned and spoke up.

"The Oomukade's weakness is a weapon with spit on it. You could switch that around to say it's weak to *being spit on*, can't you? You're going to isolate Ranzono Sachi to rob her of her celebrity status and then you're going to reject her clothing. That will remove her power as a centipede."

I was calling it Operation Emperor's New Clothes.

However, there was no guarantee it would go as well as the picture book. A failure would mean being decapitated in the public square.

"B-but, you're messing with the spare server for emergencies, right? The Intellectual Village is filled with a spider web of countless pieces of communications equipment, so destroying one or two of them isn't going to bring it all down."

"I don't have to destroy them," I corrected. "When the Zashiki Warashi messed with the router's settings, her signals got mixed in with those from my room. That shut down communications from both rooms and it took until morning to get it all running again."

"?"

"This is the same. Causing a malfunction will create more trouble than physically destroying it. I'm messing with the spare server's settings to send out a bunch of data that intentionally interferes with the village's normal lines. That will bring down all communications."

I flipped a switch.

"Okay. That just leaves the wireless communications. If I have the emergency antenna tower send out the same frequencies used for cellphones and wireless LANs, I can seal off the communications by force. If this works, it will tear the centipede legs from Ranzono Sachi. This is Step 1. We're finally stepping up onto the same stage as her."

Part 15 (3rd person)

Late at night in the sanatorium, day trader Kotemitsu Madoka was facing her computer wearing her red bloomers (perhaps for good luck). She let out a scream when the connection suddenly died.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???"

Part 16 (3rd person)

As Ranzono Sachi watched, many children used the light of their centipede legs to break the windows and enter the high-tech wooden school building. Violent wind was

blowing down the hallways. However, no one would have thought these were human children anymore. A lot of them were more centipede than human now. Some had gathered centipedes to form great wings and others had half their body completely covered like a hermit crab. Of course, not all of that would be effective. Even if they transformed their arms, they wouldn't be able to secure the lift needed to fly. They still had enough of a heart left to care about how they looked, but that was gradually fading away. They would become a formless swarm of centipedes. They would be nothing but centipedes. They used slicing wind, crushing wind, wind that corroded with oxidation, and wind that produced electricity. They found plenty of new things to fascinate themselves.

After the soldiers leveled the ground, the queen would continue forward. But that ended when Ranzono suddenly came to a stop.

A familiar deadly Youkai showed its face through a broken window.

"Oomukade!!"

She briefly forgot everything and called its name with a high-pitched voice appropriate for a girl her age.

She ran over, spread her arms, and jumped toward the large head.

"You big dummy!! Don't worry me so much!! Our centipede transformation has progressed enough to harm your skin and a lot of the kids can't control their power, so this is really dangerous!"

"…"

"But don't worry. Heh heh. It'll all be over soon. Once the transformation crosses a certain line…once this night is over, it'll all come tumbling down like when the water in a cup passes the limits of its surface tension. All of Japan will become like us. No one will be hurt by the phony ideas of beauty and ugliness and the world will be a kinder place."

"…"

The Oomukade decided shaking its head here would not reach Ranzono Sachi.

She looked down at her smartphone. Instead of the actual phone, she was using a free texting service limited to 100 characters. More and more word balloon windows opened to tell her what those in the school were finding.

Then she looked back up.

"Oomukade, you're acting as a spy for the ones trying to escape, aren't you?"

"So you noticed."

"Heh heh. I know everything about you. And I don't mind if that's what you're doing. Even if we're enemies, we're still friends. I believe you'll eventually know I was right."

Noukotsu Village's wired and wireless communications should have been down, but as far as the Oomukade could see, the children had constructed a personal

communication network using the special kind of service used for wireless keyboards and printers.

Its range was only fifty to one hundred meters, but they could exchange data without being monitored because it did not require going through a server or cellphone tower. Its misuse in America for terrorist plots and drug trades had led some to argue the maker should limit its abilities.

“Wait here.”

Ranzono Sachi shut her eyes while embracing the Oomukade’s head as if to offer herself up to that great maw.

“I’ll create a place for you, so let’s talk about more stupid stuff together afterwards.”

“Sachi.”

“But first, I need to get rid of the people standing in our way.”

“Sachi!!”

The Youkai shouted, but it was too late.

It tried to close its jaws to restrain the girl’s body, but she slipped away. With a truly bizarre sound, she quickly made her way into the dark school building. The sounds and movements she made would not have been possible using two human legs. The pants below her skirt bent oddly and the two centipedes sticking out of her skirt wrapped around each other. But even that was not enough. The countless legs were likely cutting at the air to create a violent wind that propelled her forward. She moved like a nimble snake and it reminded the Oomukade of the stories found in the East and the West of grudges transforming girls into monsters.

As soon as Sachi stepped into the hallway through the window, static came from all of the school’s speakers. A high school boy’s voice followed.

“Hi!! You’re Ranzono Sachi, I assume. I have no intention of letting you kill me, so I think I’ll put up a useless fight now!!”

(…)

Sachi operated her small screen with her thumb to instruct the others to find the broadcast room and break into it.

Meanwhile, the voice continued.

“I saw the magazine you’re in. And the clothes you’re wearing now. Why are they so mismatched? White shows up the best, so if you wear red over white, it makes the inside portion look bigger and makes your chest look bigger. The black skirt is probably meant to make your waist look thinner and it matches the chocolate color of your brown boots. But the jeans are clearly unnecessary. I can’t figure out why you would add blue into the mix. The arrangement of colors is a mess.”

(Is he trying to destroy the centipede Package by attacking what makes me “look bigger”?)

Her smartphone received a response.

It was from the boys who had broken into the broadcast room, but they had not found anything.

“No one was there. The lights weren’t even on.”

“Is there any other broadcast equipment? Check the gym or anywhere else the school would gather.”

Not knowing how to respond would give this boy more time.

Ranzono Sachi looked down the dark hallway and the boy’s voice stabbed into her ears whether she liked it or not.

“For one thing, the curls of your chestnut hair are really soft and honestly more suited for some high-class girl. The white rose corsage matches that perfectly, yet the combination of a miniskirt and jeans is obviously more of a street outfit. Your belt is wilder and butts heads with the hair. They don’t go together, yet they don’t have enough of an impact for gap appeal. It just looks like a failed outfit to me.”

(But that isn’t enough. Heh heh. It’s supposed to be a wrong. They’re supposed to know it’s wrong but still do it because I told them to. That’s how I make myself ‘look bigger’. So pointing out my mistakes won’t ruin my enlarged status!)

The girl gave a fierce smile in the hallway of broken glass.

More and more text message responses reached the centipede queen.

“No one in the gym.”

“I doubt there’s any other broadcast equipment.”

“There’s a door leading underground. It might be the kind of tornado shelter I’ve seen on TV.”

One of Ranzono Sachi’s eyebrows shot up.

She operated the device with her thumb.

“That would be the gym-sized shelter in case of a disaster. It probably has broadcast equipment to prevent a panic and to organize personnel. Tell me where the door is. It’s time to attack.”

A rumbling much like TV static filled the school.

Part 17 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Tarou had called it a bomb shelter dungeon, but it was really just a big warehouse filled with stacks of cardboard boxes. The boxes all contained canned food and sleeping bags. They were stacked two or three stories tall, so they formed perfect walls, turning the large space into a labyrinth.

Something was surrounding us from all directions on the other side of the walls made from stainless steel.

Something was scraping at the walls with ferocious speed. No, it was scraping through the walls. It was probably that wind. The deluge of sound reminded me of a heavy downpour. The tornado shelter walls were meant to withstand a tornado with wind speeds of one hundred meters per second, but they quickly crumbled and large holes appeared.

Something like clumps of black seaweed poured in along with intense blasts of wind. Most of them had lost their human forms. The arms and legs sticking out through the gaps just barely let me know what they had originally been. And that wasn't all. The weird wind that wrapped around the centipedes may have been sharp enough or powerful enough to kill someone without ever touching them.

The only one who still looked human was Ranzono Sachi because she had complete control of her transformation. When she walked in, the swarm of black centipedes split to the left and right to make a path for her.

"Heh heh. I suppose this would be checkmate."

The antennae of the countless bugs focused our way.

The lantern and umbrella stood in front of Yonesaki Hiro and tried to puff themselves up, but it was plain as day what would happen to them if an actual clash began.

"The Oomukade calls in storms. The lightning and steel-like toughness both originated from control of air pressure. That gives me plenty of options. I could bite you and fill you with venom, I could constrict you with its large body, or I could crush your eardrums and organs using great wind pressure from every direction. Oh, but…"

As soon as she said that, Ranzono Sachi casually swung the centipede she had as an arm. The creature was wrapped in a whirlwind of orange flames.

"Heh heh. That might start a fire. Like with diesel."

Dammit, I really don't have any time left. Underground really is the centipede's home turf!!

Still, my only option was to smile as I held the emergency broadcast radio microphone.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Your brand is already falling apart. Using fashion magazines is fine, but you can't accept everything they say. The people around you will be figuring that out before long."

"But I'm not going to wait around for that. So die to help me create a free and kind world."

She snapped her fingers and the seaweed-like darkness rushed in from all directions.

Part 18 (Yonesaki Hiro)

I saw darkness rushing in.

The lantern shouted something in my ear and the umbrella opened up to protect me.

But I was fine. There was no need for that.

After all, I too had *looked up to* Ranzono-san.

I gave a horizontal swing of my right hand that was still itching.

That was enough to transform it from shoulder to fingertips. I gently pushed the lantern and umbrella out of the way and forcibly swung my insect arm like a whip toward the approaching centipedes.

A clump of air exploded like it had contained a bomb and the sea of centipedes flew apart.

Ranzono-san looked surprised.

“What…?”

“I’m the same as these kids. I thought you looked cool when I saw your pictures in Autofocus. Or would you rather I said you looked cute? But either way, I looked up to you. That let the centipede power infect me.”

The many scraping sounds came from my one hundred legs. Those were a part of me now. I didn’t just strike with them. I sliced through the wind, controlled the air, and produced small storms.

“And even if that older Jinnai boy revealed everything, I still think you’re cool. After all, I also *decided I want to be a Youkai* once. But I relied on the adults, let them manipulate me, and that was the end of it. I can’t believe someone could put together all this on their own and manipulate the world of adults like you’ve done. I think we should look up to you for caring for your friends so much. I’d get mad if someone was mean to the umbrella or lantern, but I wouldn’t be able to tell you how much I’d actually be able to do. But you found an answer! And a great enough one to reject the world of adults! So!!”

More than one centipede extended from my shoulder now. More and more heads grew like Yamata-no-Orochi. I clenched and opened them like a giant hand and wind wrapped around them.

“I won’t lose. If it was the power of my feelings for you that gave me this centipede transformation, then I won’t lose to the rest of these kids! I won’t be shaken!”

“Wha-?”

“I know more good things about you than even you do!!”

“What are you saying!?”

She may have been angry because her face grew red and she charged toward me. The legs in her pants transformed into long centipedes and moved like snakes. Lots more centipedes burst from below her skirt. She beat the air with them, built up the wind, and produced flames. I responded by stepping forward. The other kids between us were knocked out of the way as our giant centipedes moved like muddy rivers and collided. Tearing at the ear created vacuums which exploded and blew everything away. My wind wrapped around Ranzono-san’s flames.

As we fought, I gradually learned more about the centipedes. It wasn't the size or shape that mattered. Nor was it creating fancy-looking winds or flames. The older Jinnai boy had said Oomukade venom was used to make curses.

Curses had to be about feelings.

The Oomukade was a Youkai that grew larger when filled with feelings, so this was a battle to see who could turn the most powerful feelings toward the other and who could pour those feelings into the other.

"What could you understand about me!? My face is fake and my heart was torn to pieces, so there's nothing of myself left! Looking up to a doll like me and innocently following me is the same as obsessing over a corpse! You don't understand anything about me!!"

"If you can hate yourself like that, it means that you have a self. You're trying to dirty yourself for the Oomukade, so you must care about your friends! And that means you can't do this. A heart that cares for its friends would never decide it's okay to hurt your classmates or parents. You've only frozen over and numbed yourself!! If you stay numb and follow through with this, you'll definitely come to regret it!!!!!"

The centipedes moved in accordance with my will and created countless forms. They punched as a giant fist, they surrounded themselves in swirls of wind and flames, they stabbed like spears, and they exploded again and again. As time passed, it became clear who had the advantage.

Unsurprisingly, Ranzono-san was more powerful. And not just in how well she used the centipedes. It didn't matter if she could shoot fire at me. The feelings, the curse, and the centipede venom at the base of it all were much, much more powerful and heavier. That was just how intense her feelings for her friends were.

"Heh heh. Is that all you have? You can't stop me!!"

"…Maybe not."

But have you forgotten, Ranzono-san?

I don't have the lead role here.

There's an older boy who knows a whole lot about Youkai behind me.

Part 19 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The scene before my eyes reminded me of the Okuri-Suzume's words that had been the start of this whole affair.

(Hiro-chan is in trouble. Save him before the Oomukade eats him, hm?)

Was this what it meant by "eat"?

In all honesty, Ranzono Sachi was dangerous. Compressing air and creating explosive flames using dust was completely insane. I wouldn't even be able to stand up to Yonesaki Hiro who was facing her alone using wind as his weapon.

And there was no need to give into sentimentality here. I only had to make use of the time he had given me.

“Don’t make me laugh, you brat!! You’re making yourself look bigger? You’re making yourself bigger than any adult? No matter how much you stretch your back, a kid’s still a kid. Do you really think you can beat a high schooler!?”

“!!”

Ranzono Sachi had been about to push Yonesaki Hiro back, but she seemed to realize something and came to a complete stop.

Yes. I was using the microphone even though she was right in front of us.

“It might’ve been easy to feel proud when surrounded by other elementary school kids. Autofocus is mainly read by middle schoolers, so you might have them beat, too. But I’m in high school, the step above that. When I look down from above, I can see your flaws immediately!!”

My argument may have seemed inconsistent or like I was refusing to admit defeat, but there was a reason for it.

Yonesaki Hiro had said a few things to me before coming here:

“But you might be able to finish off Ranzono-san.”

“To us, a single grade difference feels like an infinite barrier. The gap between elementary school and middle school feels as distant as the moon from the earth. Ranzono-san is on that moon, but you’re even higher.”

“Ranzono-san’s status is in the world of middle schoolers, so it won’t reach you. The words of a high schooler hold a lot of weight, especially about fashion.”

I haven’t let go of the microphone because it’s not you I’m speaking to.

I was speaking to Ranzono Sachi’s hangers-on, believers, gallery, and online friends who were filling the entire school grounds.

It didn’t really matter what I said.

I just had to use the difference in age and school level to build uncertainty.

After all…

“Spit on its own is meaningless. No matter how much you spit on someone, it isn’t going to damage them. It only works as the Oomukade’s weakness if you *use some other tool* as well to make it an arrowhead with spit on it.”

In other words, the act of “spitting on” the weapon meant something had to be carried to the centipede.

But then what was that?

“Oh, no.”

Ranzono Sachi had the answer, not me.

Yes. It was the cellphones and smartphones they had been using to contact each other!

Part 20 (3rd person)

“Oh, no.”

Ranzono Sachi quickly pulled out her smartphone.

She had built in a safety measure. If there was a split in the group, she had prepared an “arrowhead” to rob a member of their centipede power.

She tried to quickly block all of their addresses, but it was too late.

The text messages arrived.

“He’s saying our plan is going to fail.”

They came from other members of her own group.

“Will this really work?”

They seemed to be doubting her.

“I had thought this was a problem from the beginning.”

It was like they were spitting on her.

“This is a high schooler that’s saying it.”

It was like they were spitting on their weapon and firing it at the centipede.

Dozens or even hundreds of text message complaints rushed toward Ranzono Sachi, their leader.

She did not even have time to scream.

The giant centipede her arm had become burst apart. A slender, feminine arm appeared from within. After that, the darkness surrounding her began to burst, bit by bit. The objects that no longer looked human reverted to being boys and girls.

“Ah…ahh…”

Her vision wavered and a voice escaped her.

She had been a step away from a world where she was free to smile with the Oomukade and the other Youkai, but now it was growing eternally distant.

“Ahhhhhh!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Now, that would be checkmate.”

The absolutely unreachable being that was a high schooler spoke into the microphone again.

As if it had been waiting for this moment, her friend the Oomukade poked its head down from the stairs leading to the surface.

“It doesn’t matter how many of you there are. We’ve got a high schooler who might as well be on the moon and a real deadly Youkai. …Now, what will you do, elementary school kids? Do any of you still want to take us on?”

Part 21 (3rd person)

Jinnai Shinobu and the others climbed the stairs to the surface where some police cars waited. Instead of the old man from the village’s police box, several police cars had been sent in from the next rural city over.

But that was not because they knew about the trouble caused by Ranzono Sachi and her group.

“Illegal trespassing, property damage, violation of the Radio Law, and, um, what else was there? Anyway, messing with the antenna tower stood out too much. That even affected the next town over. Well, just pray you don’t get kidnapping, abduction of a minor, or some other perverted charge tacked on there as well, high schooler.”

“You’re kidding!! You’re handcuffing me!? And why is it all on me!? How is a human supposed to destroy the walls of a tornado shelter!?”

There was no system to charge the Youkai themselves with a crime, but it was possible to charge Ranzono Sachi’s group that had misused one’s power. If he could prove he had been under attack by dozens of individuals and that he had been fighting to protect Yonesaki Hiro, his actions would qualify as justified self-defense or an emergency escape and the charges would be dropped, but that was another story.

Ranzono Sachi had been taken into custody by uniformed police officers and Yonesaki Hiro ran over to her with the umbrella and lantern following him.

She looked away from him, but he clearly heard her speak.

“I did the right thing, so I’ll try again as many times as it takes. I’ll keep at it until our beauty and ugliness have melted away and we all become the same.”

“Then I’ll stop you as many times as it takes. I know the real you can’t do something like that.”

The exchange sounded something like Izanagi and Izanami from Japanese mythology.

Just as the police officers began to carry the girl toward a police car, Yonesaki Hiro said one more thing.

“Ranzono-san! Can I ask you just one more thing?”

“What?”

He breathed in and then out.

He looked her straight in the eye and asked.

“*Will you show me your face?*”

He did not mean it literally. She was a Kasane_12. Human trick art was used to thoroughly alter the impression she gave people, so that question had special meaning for her.

In fact, her eyes opened wide.

Then she smiled just a little. She covered her face with her hands and moved them like drying it with a towel after washing it. It looked like a scene from a classic ghost story where a Nopperabou would appear.

Finally, she moved her hands out of the way.

She exposed the unadorned face that her classmates, neighbors, and even parents had rejected.

She then asked a cruelly ironic question.

“*Am I pretty?*”

And this time, Yonesaki Hiro’s immediate response caught her completely off guard.

“Yes. Very.”

Chapter 2: Development@Uchimaku Hayabusa & Hachikawa Tomoe

Part 1 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

“Tarot Girls 22 here! First it was burgers, then it was gyudon, and now we have a brand new fast food revolution! The revolutionary restaurant Neko Manma is exactly what it sounds like! This bowl full of rice covered in exactly the kind of miso soup you want is a friend to the masses. And of course you can choose red miso, white miso, bonito broth, sea slug broth, pork broth, or seafood broth. As the Empress of the Major Arcana, I, Anemura Kaede, am rooting for this nostalgic yet new style of food!!”

An idol’s recorded announcement played on a loop to match the commercial playing on the restaurant’s TVs.

I copied the mascot’s cry of “Miso soup splash!” as I poured the shark broth on the steaming white rice in my bowl.

Ahhh!! Working out of the office is so hard!!

Investigation Department 1’s chief was shoving all the worst jobs on me to repay me for acting without permission so much lately. Food was the only thing I had to look forward to, which seemed like a major red flag from a mental health perspective.

“Eh, ah, ahem!! ‘Uchimaku, take this file and get investigating. A coroner’s autopsy isn’t enough to determine whether the old folks who died alone in their homes and then mummified really did die natural deaths or not. Go reinvestigate everything to see if there was a crime involved.’ Detective, your colleagues really do hate you, don’t they?”

“Why are you here, Miss Compulsory Education? And how can you do such a spot on impersonation of the chief from this morning!?”

“That’s. A. Secret☆ By the way, detective, if you’re gonna eat at Neko Manma, you need to get the famous Miyazaki cold miso. Honestly, don’t you know anything? That’s the #1 dish here.”

“You’re kidding. Wouldn’t that leave you with cold rice?”

The twintailed Mystery Freak was pretty much wearing a swimsuit around town again. She suddenly appeared in the seat next to me and took a bowl. The one thing that was appropriate for her age was the scarf modeled after a character with a really long body. It was midday, so the counter seats were packed full and she used that fact to press up against me more than absolutely necessary.

“You aren’t going to find any new evidence in this reinvestigation. How many years ago did the first investigation end? How many decades ago did those old people die? Unless the blunt weapon or blade reached the bone, not even an autopsy would find anything at this point. You aren’t going to find any new witnesses or a murder weapon. There’s just nothing there.”

“The chief probably knows that and wants me to waste my time. To hell with him.”

If you were willing to live with a corpse, it might be possible to commit the perfect crime without dumping the body in the forest or ocean. As long as you didn’t illegally take money from their pension, it would be treated as a natural death and no criminal case could be made. And as long as the family living in the same house “didn’t notice”, it didn’t count as abandonment of a corpse. Of course, it would take twenty or thirty years of living with the stench of death to receive the benefits of mummification, so it was simply too frightening to imagine.

“What are you doing, Mystery Freak?”

“Well, my actions might overlap with yours, so I thought I should pop in to say hello.”

“?”

“Hey, hey. If you’re investigating the mystery of the old mummies, why not go on a date with me☆? Splitting up would be inefficient, so if we’re both going after the Ubasute Apartments, we might as well flirt along the way☆”

“Ubasute…Apartments?”

That unexpected term left me in shock.

“Uba” was rarely used to mean “old woman” in modern times, but it could still be seen in the name of a Youkai called a Yamanba.

Ubasute was the act of abandoning one’s parents in the mountains because you didn’t have enough money to support them or were sick of taking care of them. And the fate of an old person abandoned in the dark mountains was obvious. People argued about the ethics of euthanasia in modern times, but the concept of Ubasute made it hard to say the past was always better. The topic made my food seem completely flavorless.

I didn’t know what exactly this was about, but I knew where the name Ubasute Apartments had to have come from.

Meanwhile, the Mystery Freak spoke up while rubbing her head on my shoulder.

“Its official name is different of course, but over fifty old people have died alone there in the last three years and they were all immediately deemed natural deaths. Don’t they seem oddly unwilling to call it a crime? Are you feeling a little more motivated now?”

Part 2 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Sugamo was known as the Old Lady’s Harajuku, but it was slowly changing. Trees had been planted here and there to add a little more green to the scenery and residential areas were popping up for old people who wanted a peaceful life. Of course, land was always at a premium, so the apartments tended to be in high-rise buildings.

Ikebukuro was nearby, so it might have been something like Daikanyama was to central Shibuya.

“That’s not an apartment building. These days, graveyards are built in high rise buildings too.”

“Seriously? Well, at least I can’t imagine any ghosts or offering thieves showing up there.”

“And that tree over there is a grave tree. They get a whopping fifteen applications for every open spot. …But I feel like a lone tree standing in the middle of a park would end up withering away from all the things people would do to it.”

We spoke back and forth as we made our way to the investigation site on foot.

The Ubasute Apartments in question were outside the aforementioned residential area.

Around twenty identical buildings were squeezed in together like bookcases in a library. The buildings themselves looked old, but they seemed properly maintained and didn’t feel unclean. Still, their overall atmosphere was somehow different from the other places. The area had a lot more trees than elsewhere, so the apartment buildings seemed to poke out from a thick forest. Just by blocking the view and the road gave the entire place a sense of rejection.

“Is this really the only way in?”

“It certainly is inconvenient.”

The brick-paved road was narrower than a farm road and it meandered back and forth. The road itself was quite bumpy because tree roots were pushing it up from below.

I doubted you could get a scooter through, much less a car.

We continued down the awful road for two or three hundred meters as if going for a picnic…no, for a light hike. If the path had been straight, it wouldn’t have been half that long.

Finally, the manmade forest cleared up and an impressive form stood in our way.

We had reached the Ubasute Apartments.

The closest building’s entrance was a lot like a school’s main entrance or a hospital’s visitor’s entrance. According to the plate set up there, the official name was Wankashi Camp Apartments.

As I read that name, I heard a slamming. I looked up at the six or seven story building and saw one of the many windows slam shut.

No, it wasn’t just one.

After that first one, that sound of rejection continued from all over. It was just like when a meeting had fallen silent and someone cleared their throat.

“Now that’s what I call a warm reception.”

“I don’t care as long as they don’t drop a flower pot on us from the balcony. … Anyway, what are these?”

Several metal buckets were sitting around here and there. They were dented and filled with dirty water. Were they full of rainwater?

Then I noticed an old man in a track suit watering a flower garden with a watering can. After using up the water in the watering can, he grabbed one of the buckets from the ground and poured its contents into the watering can. Filled with that much water, the bucket had to be quite heavy.

The Mystery Freak immediately jumped at this chance.

“Hey, mister.”

“What?”

The old man sounded incredibly suspicious, but he didn’t refuse to talk altogether.

Enbi used that to her advantage and pushed further.

“That looks tough. Why do you collect the water in buckets?”

“The buckets gather rainwater. This is the most efficient way.”

…*What?*

“Mister, but wouldn’t it be easier to use the faucet?”

“Water is valuable. Kids these days might not get that, though.”

He then asked us a question with the refilled watering can in hand.

“What are you two doing here? I didn’t think door-to-door salesmen would visit a place like this.”

Let’s see. Where did I put my police badge?

I checked through my pockets and finally pulled my ID from my back pants pocket.

“I’m from the police. I’m here today for, well, additional investigation on some people who died alone.”

“You’re a police officer?”

He clearly frowned and gave me an even more skeptical look.

“Don’t the police normally work in groups of two?”

“Not always.”

Police officers in dramas were sometimes mocked for acting alone, but it was pretty common in reality. If there was a rule forcing us to work in pairs, we’d be spotted right away if we tried to tail someone. It would completely undermine the concept of a plainclothes officer.

“But it certainly isn’t normal for one to be working with a teenage girl.”

“That is very true. I am well aware of that fact and I have nothing to say in my defense.”

“I don’t care how kids dress, but at least cover up your midriff. You’re only hurting yourself doing that.”

After spitting out those words, the old man started toward the building with the empty watering can in hand.

“Um, uh…”

“My name is Tayama Sunao. You can check around the apartments if you want.”

“I’d like to speak with the manager, so do you know where they might be?”

“No. In fact, haven’t seen them in a while.”

Tayama-san didn’t even turn back our way.

“Oh, and while I don’t care what you do, don’t use the elevator.”

With that, he really did vanish into the building.

The Mystery Freak and I exchanged a glance.

“What should we do?”

“Whatever we can. We don’t really need his permission.”

I pulled out a cellphone equipped with a police SIM and called up the file for this job. I decided to check the rooms of the deceased old people and then ask around at the neighboring rooms.

I walked through the large apartment grounds based on the file.

As we made our way through the closely packed buildings, the windows slammed shut around us. They were rejecting outsiders, but they weren’t ignoring them. The buildings were filled with countless eyes and I could tell they were all focused on us.

These were the Wankashi Camp Apartments, aka the Ubasute Apartments. According to the Mystery Freak, more than fifty people had died alone here in three years, but the closest such room was on the sixth floor of Building 3.

The building had nothing as fancy as automatically locking doors, so we walked right in. The first floor was not part of the living area. Instead, it seemed to be focused on recreation. A lobby for chatting was filled with benches and a large room was lined with health equipment. We passed through that area and climbed the stairs.

“Hey, Mystery Freak, why’s this place known as the Ubasute Apartments anyway?”

“I’m sure you can guess. It’s an inexpensive option for old folks to live alone. It made waves online for being so incredibly cheap in the city center. The problem is no one knows how to contact the real estate agency.”

“…?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m only repeating the rumors.”

We discussed the case as we climbed the stairs, but the Mystery Freak was already worn out by the third floor.

“Wait, detective… I’m tired…”

“How!? You have to climb three or four flights of stairs at school, don’t you!?”

“My school has elevators. So how about we use the ones here? That old man’s not looking.”

It was true the apartments had seven stories. And twenty buildings, too. If we had to go up and down the stairs that many times, it would be about as much effort as some light mountain climbing.

The Mystery Freak walked right past the next flight of stairs and entered the hallway. There, she pressed the button to one of the four elevators.

“Look, it isn’t even malfunctioning or anything. The light came on, so…”

But Enbi was cut off by another voice.

“Hold iiiiit!! Didn’t anyone tell you not to use the elevator!?”

The roaring voice sounded like a nearby lightning strike.

“Hyah!”

The Mystery Freak jumped and I looked over to find an old lady in an apron poking her head out from a door and giving Enbi a devilish glare. She stomped over, grabbed the Mystery Freak’s hand, and pulled her away.

It almost looked like she was moving her away from the elevator door.

“Honestly. Don’t you give any thought to your safety? …And what kind of outfit is that!? A young girl shouldn’t be walking around in public with her midriff showing!!”

“If that dense man would finally give in and have his way with me, I wouldn’t have to dress like this to seduce him! And it’s already October, you know!? Even I know wearing a swimsuit now is weird!! This scarf is a decoration! This is the surefire sexy swimsuit scarf! Tah dah!!”

“If you know it’s weird, then why don’t you stop!?”

I shouted back with my skin crawling, but no one was listening.

At any rate, the old lady seemed to have taken that conversation at face value.

“Hm? The population has grown to 150 million, but there are still traces of the Immoral Ten Year Project meant to increase the birthrate? How sad. If that scarf is fur, I might faint.”

The apron old lady sounded angry, but she didn’t seem to have all that bad an impression of us. It may have been that she was scolding us instead of angry with us. And her issues with the Mystery Freak’s clothing seemed grounded in worry for the girl’s safety, not her own displeasure.

Tayama-san from the flower garden may have been the same.

In that case, why were they telling us not to use the elevator? I had initially thought it was a way of telling us we were uninvited guests, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“So what are you two doing here?”

“This doesn’t explain her, but I am a police officer. …Um, this is hard to say, but I’m performing some additional investigation into the death of some people who died alone.”

“Oh.” She readily answered without seeming displeased. “You mean *Akasabi-san*. That isn’t entirely unrelated to me.”

“?”

Akasabi-san?

I was confused, but the old lady also seemed confused.

“Is that not it?”

“Well, the investigation has only just begun, so I don’t know any of the details yet. But if you’re willing, could you tell me about this Akasabi-san?”

“That’s fine. Besides, whoever you ask, you’ll end up talking about Akasabi-san. That’s just how well-known the story is.”

Part 3 (Hachikawa Tomoe)

I had completely forgotten we had school off after the midterm exams, so I had no real plans despite the day off. With nothing else to do, I decided to visit “his” grave since I’d been putting it off for quite a while.

That was because my mom had gotten remarried. My new dad was nice and I had no real complaints about our new family, but it was still hard to talk about “him”.

Well, since I was able to dig up those old memories, maybe I had finally managed to come to terms with that incident involving a Jinmensou and my friend Mio.

I left home on the pretext of going shopping and boarded the train to Sugamo. I had to wonder what my mom thought when I left in my beige blazer-style winter uniform despite having the day off. I chose some random flowers at the florist by the train station and walked to the graveyard with the bouquet. It was a weekday, so it must

have been a strange sight to anyone who didn't know about our post-exam day off. Still, I wasn't stopped by a police officer. The big city really could be cold.

On the way, I spotted a middle-aged man and woman arguing at the main gate of what seemed to be an elementary school.

The man looks like a teacher, but who's the woman?

"Please calm down, ma'am. Just calm down a little, okay?"

"Shut up!! I know they did it! Who else could have? You suspect them deep down too, don't you!?"

"Like I've been saying, there's no way to be sure."

"But they brought a weapon to the school that other time… If you aren't going to report this, I'll do it myself. But if I do it, you might just be found complicit in this!!"

…What in the world is going on?

The woman returned my curious look with a sharp glare, so I made a rapid exit. I had no concrete dreams for the future, but I had a few clear ideas of what I *didn't* want to be. A housewife who only caused trouble without doing any housework was one of those. If you didn't do any housework and didn't have a job, you were just a grown-up shut-in.

I regathered my thoughts and continued toward the graveyard.

High-rise graveyard buildings and grave trees had become common in recent times, but "he" had prepared himself a stone grave on the grounds of a Buddhist temple. And he had done it long before he died. He had pretentiously said a policeman never knew when he was going to die so he had dealt with that ahead of time, but I doubted that was the real reason.

The buildings and grave trees had people to look after them, so the family didn't have to maintain the grave. I was pretty sure he hadn't liked the sound of that.

He tried to keep a composed appearance, but he could actually get pretty lonely.

I set foot in the temple's graveyard while messing with my cellphone, but I found someone was already there.

The man was a police officer just like "him".

I was pretty sure his name was Sotobori Gaku. His most noticeable features were the solid build of a judo ace and an extremely intimidating face. He also had plenty of scars. Of course, he was a professional who fought day and night against *large criminal organizations*, so he had probably given himself that look on purpose.

He had arrived ahead of me, so the grave was already clean and the withered flower and old offering had been replaced with new ones.

He smiled bitterly when he saw me.

"What's this, Tomoe-chan? Are middle school girls so attached to their electronics that they can't put them down in a graveyard?"

“I’m playing this for ‘him’. It’s Tarot Girls 22’s new song. …Honestly, can you believe a man of his age was supporting some teenage idols behind his daughter’s back? That man really loved his fads.”

“Eh? What? Really!? I’ll never be able to think about him the same way again!!”

“Ah ha ha. And he’s not going to drink that sake you brought as an offering. He would act cool and go along when his colleagues went out drinking, but when he got home, he’d start vomiting into the toilet.”

But despite what I said, I wasn’t confident I knew who he really was either.

He had lost his life during the Jinmensou incident involving my friend Mio, but I hadn’t noticed a villain had taken his place until the very, very end.

If the detective named Uchimaku hadn’t saved me, that villain probably would have killed me.

I separated my bouquet’s flowers and placed them around the grave as offerings. Then I held my hands together in front of the grave.

Thanks to my mom’s remarriage, I was now part of the Hachikawa family, so I didn’t know if I would end up in this grave engraved with the name “Toujou”. Still, I thought I should at least be allowed to pray for the deceased.

After I reopened my eyes, I asked Sotobori-san a question.

“Hey, what kind of person was ‘he’ to you?”

“A detective.”

His answer came without a moment’s delay, but he must have thought that wasn’t enough because he scratched his head and said more.

“Being a police officer is an occupation. If they didn’t pay you, no one would do it. But once you keep at it for five or ten years, it starts soaking into every part of you. That’s what I mean when I say he had brought being a detective to the level of a lifestyle. Even if he had been fired for some reason, I doubt he ever could have escaped that way of living.”

“…”

“That’s just how it is. You may not like to hear it since he was always neglecting you, but Toujou Miyabi lived the life of a detective to the very end. If he didn’t have steadfast convictions, he would have stopped before he was killed.”

Honestly. Does that mean he grew up or that he never grew up?

Sotobori-san here and Uchimaku-san who had saved me may have been the same.

And speaking of Uchimaku-san…

“H-hey. You know Uchimaku-san, right? What’s he doing now? He seemed a lot like ‘him’, so is he doing well?”

“Ohhhh, I see.”

“Wh-what?”

“That guy only seems to attract the ones who ‘aren’t quite there yet’. If they just had another ten…no, even just five more years, he would have had a man’s idea of heaven waiting for him.”

“Wh-what are you trying to say!?”

“Let me ask you something instead, Tomoe-chan.”

Sotobori-san grinned as he pulled a cellphone from his pocket.

“I know Uchimaku, so I naturally have his phone number and email address. So what are you going to do, Tomoe-chan? This is the perfect chance if you want his address.”

They really are kids! The police are nothing but children!!

“Wh-what? What are you-… I don’t, um, want…”

“This might be your one and only chance, you know? Over thirty million people move through Tokyo every day, so surely you aren’t thinking you’ll just so happen to miraculously bump into him again without putting any work into it yourself.”

“Uuh…”

I looked away from him.

Damn, I can feel the heat in my cheeks. I know what this means, so why can’t I stop myself from holding out my cellphone!?

My voice was barely audible as I announced my surrender.

“Please…give it to me.”

“Sure thing. …Y’know, this means I’m giving a grown man’s address to a man’s daughter right in front of his grave. I hope he doesn’t start haunting me.”

“Sh-shut up. That isn’t what this is about! And I don’t care if he does show up as a ghost! That would probably make things a little livelier around here!!”

My argument was losing any coherence as I held the cellphone close to my chest.

I-I have it.

But what am I supposed to do with it!?

Sotobori-san then turned his head as if he had noticed something.

“Now, then. I can’t intrude any longer, so I’ll be going. It’s probably been a while for you, so take your time.”

“?”

I gave him a puzzled look as he waved and left, but I soon realized what this was about. Someone else was approaching through the graveyard.

Toujou…Midori-san.

She was ‘his’ younger sister. That made her my aunt.

“Long time no see, Tomoe-chan.”

I didn’t know what to call her, but I finally smiled and called her the same thing I had the last time we had met.

“It's nice seeing you again, Aunt Midori.”

Part 4 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

The old lady in an apron we met in the Ubasute Apartments was apparently named Nezu Yuki. We didn’t want to stand around and talk, so she showed us to her apartment.

It seemed to have been designed with a family in mind because it had a fair number of rooms. It was all well-maintained, so it looked old yet clean. However, the size of the apartment made it feel a little lonely for an old woman to be living their alone.

Also, the lighting was oddly dim, but it wasn’t enough to make reading difficult. She probably just wanted to save electricity.

“I won’t serve you any tea. I’m out of tea leaves.”

She was also incredibly blunt.

“Well, this topic will kill your appetite anyway, so it may be better this way. Anyone who could eat while discussing Akasabi-san couldn’t be human.”

“So who is this Akasabi-san?”

“Probably one of the people you’re investigating.”

Nezu-san sat at the kitchen table with a groan of effort. The Mystery Freak and I decided to sit in the opposite seats.

“Akasabi-san was one of those who died alone, but the situation was a little different from the bedridden folks without anyone looking after them who dried up, collapsed from a sudden illness, and weren’t found by anyone. Akasabi-san was trapped inside.”

“Trapped inside?”

In where? And by who?

If a third party was involved, it wouldn’t be a natural death. That was more than enough to be a crime.

But when she saw the sharp look in my eyes, Nezu-san waved her hands in front of her face.

“Hear me out first. I’m talking about the bath door. It had apparently already been old and rattling in its frame, but at some point the door seems to have soaked up

enough water to expand. That kept it from moving at all. Akasabi-san was trapped inside the bath."

"Oh, I get it. So they were trapped inside all on their own."

Nezu-san nodded at the Mystery Freak's comment.

"Regardless, they couldn't get out. At first, they apparently didn't feel much danger since they were still inside their own house. …But that doesn't change the fact that they were trapped inside. And people die if they don't have anything to eat. After realizing the danger, they banged on the door, but it was no use. They couldn't use the phone and no one showed up after they shouted from the small window."

"You mean…?"

How would that have felt?

No one ever thought of their own home as a dangerous or deadly place. The trapped person might laugh at what had happened, but as soon as they realized it's no laughing matter, everything they thought they knew would be turned on its head.

"There was some bathwater left in the bathtub. Drinking that was enough to stay alive, but only stay alive. Their strength faded as the days passed and they lost the strength needed to break down the door or even shout out the window. This continued for a week or two. …They couldn't even die. They knew they were going to run out of strength eventually, but they extended their suffering. They probably wished they hadn't had that lifeline so they could have just given up. I heard the bathtub plug had been pulled out by the time the body was found."

It was an unimaginable story.

Had their thoughts on life and death been turned upside down along with everything else?

In that small world, living had become suffering and death had become a salvation.

"But apparently the dampness of the bath hadn't completely vanished. Finding a naked corpse would be disturbing enough, but the group that found Akasabi-san apparently saw a pile of bright colored mold covering the entire bath. The corpse was curled up in the center of it all and I hear the mold had turned it to mush like severe athlete's foot covering the entire body."

She was right about this not being a topic to discuss over tea.

I was a detective and seeing crime scenes was a part of the job, so I was fairly accustomed to seeing corpses. But this was different. There was no malicious trick yet someone's life had been carelessly lost. It felt so empty because the only solution was to accept that these things happened.

"Everyone in the apartments started talking about how we didn't want the same thing to happen to us, so we started worrying about how the bath doors fit in their frames."

But if this woman's story was true, there was no crime involved. It wasn't something a police officer like me needed to investigate any further. …If it was true no one else was involved, that is.

A drowning could be disguised by letting the corpse mummify or decay. Strangling them could leave a rope mark around the neck or break their neck, but nothing of the sort remained if they were drowned. The mold would have caused the corpse to decay in an extremely short time, so what if someone had intentionally set the room temperature and humidity to promote its growth?

I pulled out my cellphone to find this Akasabi-san on the list of those who had died alone, but then the Mystery Freak spoke to Nezu-san.

“Hey, ma’am, I have one question about this famous Akasabi-san.”

“What is it?”

“Which room did they live in?”

It was an obvious question and the old Nezu Yuki-san gave a clear answer in a tone that seemed to ask why we were asking something so silly.

“That’s the thing. Everyone will point to a different room if you ask them. Well, I’m sure one of them is the real one.”

Part 5 (Hachikawa Tomoe)

It had truly been a long time since I had visited a relative’s house for fun.

Toujou Midori-san’s house was near the graveyard. It was a small house, but I thought it was amazing enough to have your own home in Tokyo when the country’s population had grown to 150 million.

“Sorry. Takkun would have wanted to play with you, but she’s still at school. She’s probably only just getting back from her field trip. Would you mind killing some time with your aunt instead?”

“Takkun, hm?”

Despite the “kun”, Takkun wasn’t a boy. The girl’s name was Toujou Takumi-chan and that had been shortened to Takkun. I couldn’t quite remember how old she would be, but I was pretty sure she would still be in elementary school.

We watched TV in the living room and I had a meaningless chat with Midori-san. She would complain about how the beautiful had all the luck since the Tarot Girls 22 could have a scandal but come out of it more popular because it made them seem “more human”.

At some point, Midori-san changed the subject.

“Come to think of it, Tomoe-chan, did you see anyone strange on your way here?”

“Strange?”

I remembered the woman throwing a fit at the elementary school, but that didn’t seem to be what she was talking about.

“There’s an apartment complex just outside of this area and the old people that live there, well…”

“What about them?”

“I guess you could say they get angry easily and, well, they’ve been causing a lot of trouble in the area lately. But as long as you weren’t caught up in it, it doesn’t matter.”

She seemed hesitant to speak, so she was clearly choosing a softer way of putting this.

Hmm…

It might have been forcing my own image or role onto them, but I felt like old men and women should be living in big rural houses. The old folks who would snap angrily at anyone and got so obsessed with the horse races honestly seemed to be wasting their time and it felt kind of sad. It was too painful to watch when they started shoplifting because they wanted attention or started stalking any young woman who so much as smiled their way.

Of course, old people were human too, so there were good ones and bad ones. They had their own thoughts and some would always be filled with shallow desires no matter how long they lived. That was probably all it was.

“Anyway, I’m glad to hear you didn’t see anything like that, Tomoe-chan.”

That was all Midori-san said.

We watched TV for a while longer and she commented that they got the seasoning wrong on the cooking show and told me how many times a certain actress had been married. At some point, I realized quite a bit of time had passed.

Toujou Midori-san checked the clock and tilted her head.

“Oh? She should have been back by now.”

“Maybe she went to a friend’s house.”

“I tell her to send an email when she does that.”

I decided not to mention how restrictive that rule sounded to me.

I stood up from the table.

“Then I’ll go check at her school.”

“Eh? You don’t have to do that. It would be meaningless if you just missed each other.”

“Ah ha ha. To be honest, I just wanted an excuse to go jogging. You’ve been having me eat so much that I can’t even calculate out how many calories I’ve had.”

With that said, I put my shoes on in the entrance, but my aunt still looked troubled.

“Tomoe-chan, I know you’re on a diet, but don’t force yourself. They said on TV some female athletes get irregular periods.”

“I’m not working myself that hard, so don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

I opened the front door with a bitter smile.

As I did so, question marks danced inside my heart.

I know they might be causing trouble, but was Midori-san really the type to bad mouth people like that?

Part 6 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

It made no sense to me.

Nezu Yuki-san, the old woman in an apron, claimed to know the story of Akasabi-san quite well, but she also didn't know where the deceased's room was. In that case, what was that story? Since everyone here supposedly knew it, I doubted she had simply made it up.

"Detective, do you think this Akasabi-san person actually exists?"

"Eh? What?"

"You might be able to look through your list with a number of different kanji spellings in mind, but I doubt you'll find anything. Akasabi isn't a name." The Mystery Freak grinned. "When the body was found, Akasabi-san was covered in bright-colored mold, remember? I bet it was the rust-like color of the mold that led to the name.[2] They were simply given a name based on how they looked. I bet there really was an original decayed corpse covered in mold, but was it really someone named Akasabi? What about the story about the bath? I don't know about that. The story might even be based on more than one person."

Oh, I get it.

When I thought of it like that, it started to make sense and it was a lot easier to judge the credibility of that old woman's story.

Still, it wasn't an entirely baseless rumor. It wasn't something hidden deep in the ocean or the mountains. Someone had died here and no one knew who it was.

The person had died all alone, they had been left to rot, and the facts had deteriorated with time. It felt different from the murder cases I had faced in the past. This was someone's very existence vanishing, not just their life.

"Wh-what's this all of a sudden!? And after I was kind enough to tell you my story!"

"Okay, ma'am, then do you know whether Akasabi-san was a man or a woman?"

"Um, well…"

She immediately started mumbling. We weren't talking about a beautiful Thai shemale, so she would at least know the sex of someone she had actually met.

"So you could say this Akasabi-san existed or that they didn't. At the very least, you aren't going to find them in your data and they aren't just a rumor. I doubt anyone knows who they were anymore. You might want to check through the past deaths in these apartments. That would probably narrow it down a little in some normal

[2] Akasabi can mean rust.

apartments, but this place has an oddly high rate of people dying alone. It would be really hard to determine exactly who this was based on.”

That seemed to settle things for the time being.

Of course, actual investigations weren’t so simple that everything people told you led directly to the truth. With all the people dying alone in the Ubasute Apartments, it was easy for speculation and assumptions to get out of control. I decided I needed to be extra careful as I gathered more information.

And then a heavy rumble and vibration filled the entire building.

“!? What!?”

I looked to the ceiling instead of front, back, left, or right. I belatedly realized I was reacting as if it were an earthquake, but that was not what this was. The shaking was focused on a single point as if a dump truck had crashed into the building.

Even more surprisingly, the old woman sitting across from us did not seem at all concerned.

Nezu-san sounded perfectly calm when she spoke.

“That may have been the elevator.”

That was hard to believe, but the Mystery Freak and I decided to check it out. We left Nezu-san’s room, but there was no one in the hallway. Not a single person had left their room despite the entire building shaking.

What was going on?

The elevator doors were still closed on this middle-level floor, so checking it here wouldn’t help. Enbi and I ran down the stairs and finally caught a glimpse of the oddity on the first floor.

One of the elevator doors had bulged outwards and fallen over. The elevator inside was tilted outwards. The mirror meant to reveal anyone hiding inside was broken and glass shards were scattered across the floor.

“Looks like it fell from pretty high up. Did the wire snap? But the emergency brakes must not have worked.”

“More importantly, I’m glad no one was riding it at the time.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and a voice reached me from behind.

“Of course not. Who would go out of their way to ride something so dangerous?”

I turned around and found Tayama Sunao-san, the old man in a track suit who had been watering the flower garden.

“Something so dangerous?” The Mystery Freak sounded confused. “You make it sound like you knew that already.”

“Of course I did. I don’t think it’s been inspected for at least twenty years.”

He made that sound obvious, but I was utterly shocked.

What!? Twenty years!?

“Um, wait a second! That can’t be true. What is the manager doing? Haven’t you ever heard of the Fire Services Act!?”

“Don’t ask me.”

I’m not saying it’s your fault!!

“Besides, if you go over all the laws, it’ll probably turn out that we’re the ones in the wrong. That’s why we can’t rely on the police or lawyers. To be honest, I’m still not sure what a police officer like you is doing here.”

“What are you talking about?”

Wasn’t this an obvious case of neglect by the manager or real estate company? What would have happened if one of the residents had been riding that elevator?

Tayama-san answered my questions by pointing to a poster on the elevator hall wall.

“Just look at this.”

Confused, I slowly followed his instructions and only found more confusion.

The poster contained the contact information for the real estate company that managed the Wankashi Camp Apartments.

Or it should have.

“Keep out!! This condemned building is the property of Wankashi Real Estate and entrance is strictly forbidden. If anyone disobeys this warning, we are prepared to press charges. –Wankashi Real Estate. Reception Desk: 0@0-XXXX-XXXX”

If I had skimmed through it without paying much attention, it might have seemed perfectly normal. It wasn’t uncommon for managers to forbid anyone but residents so they could keep out malicious solicitations.

But this was definitely odd.

“What is this? Condemned building!?”

“Ohhh, so that’s it.”

I shouted in confusion, but the Mystery Freak smiled as if it had all clicked for her. She then asked Tayama-san a question.

“Hey, mister, how much of a security deposit or key money did you pay when you rented a room here?”

“There was nothing of the sort.”

“Then one more question. Who was your guarantor when you rented a room here?”

“I didn’t need anything of the sort.”

I frowned at the consecutive denials.

Those circumstances were too far out of the ordinary. The lack of a guarantor was especially damning. While there were celebrities who bought a luxury mansion with cash, anyone else would need a guarantor when making residency arrangements.

There were even young folks who had a job and a decent social standing but were forced into homelessness because they were too isolated to get the guarantor needed to lease an apartment.

At that point, it all started to make sense.

Weren't there illegal businesses that preyed on people with precisely those problems?

"That's what this is, detective." The Mystery Freak grinned as she gave her conclusion. "On paper, these aren't apartments at all. They're disguised as abandoned buildings and these old people are technically living here without permission."

"You mean this is *the largest illegal apartment business in Japan*!?"

The entire apartment complex!?

I was shocked and Tayama-san gave an exasperated sigh.

He almost seemed to be speaking to two children who just did not understand.

"If that was all, this would be a lot easier."

There's more?

"Listen. It's true that this place is known as an abandoned building on paper. We live here illegally and we keep sending money to someone who 'technically' isn't affiliated with the real estate company. That of course means the elevators aren't inspected and they have no obligation to send us any electricity, gas, or water. It's an abandoned building after all."

The old man told us something unbelievable.

But he wasn't the one being unreasonable. It was the circumstances he had found himself in.

"So if they want to, they can cut off our lifeline as easily as turning off the tap. That's perfect for anyone who wants us to hurry up and die in our rooms."

"You don't mean…"

These were known as the Ubasute Apartments.

The apartments were filled with an unnatural number of old people who had died natural deaths all alone.

"We were intentionally abandoned here," spat out the old man in the track suit. "The families that were sick of looking after us worked with the real estate company that had prepared this dumping ground for pure profit. The unusual number of deaths

didn’t happen naturally. They’ll cut off our water during the summer or cut power to our heater during winter, so we’re left with no way to survive.”

What the hell is that?

Isn’t that just a large-scale automated execution device?

Since they could wait for the old people to die without dirtying their own hands, the killers wouldn’t feel any guilt. By so thoroughly preparing the environment, the families could easily drive them to their deaths while thinking “that’s just how it is”.

It was exactly like the Ubasute Mountain from long ago!

Part 7 (Hachikawa Tomoe)

I didn’t have a jogging outfit to change into, so I ran more leisurely down the unfamiliar road. The colors of Tokyo changed a lot depending on which region you were in and this one seemed to slow the flow of time. Or maybe the Ochanomizu and Jinbocho area I lived in was just too intense. That area was full of musical instruments, old books, and universities.

But the commotion that awaited me blew that atmosphere away.

It was at the gate to the same elementary school as before.

I was worried it was that same woman again, but there were more now.

Ahh! That shrill middle-aged woman has multiplied!

“Wait! What do you mean they weren’t here!?”

“Managing the route to school is the school’s responsibility! Explain yourselves!!”

“See? This is what happens when you assume it isn’t your problem!!”

Some of them seemed to be directing their anger in a bit of a different direction, but the middle-aged army was making a scene all the same. I felt bad for the male teacher who had waves of old lady smell pressing in on him. The children who cheerfully passed by and said goodbye to the teacher also had a hard life.

I decided to get out of here as soon as possible after I checked to see if Takkun – Toujou Takumi-chan – was here.

“How many times do I have to ask!? Tell me where my Megumu is!! Do you really think I’m going to accept that no one’s seen her as if she vanished into thin air!?”

…Eh?

I briefly doubted my ears.

What was that?

If it was true, this was no laughing matter.

“Um, uh, wait a second!! Wait!!”

“What do you want!?”

“Have you seen a girl named Toujou Takumi!? She’s my cousin and she hasn’t returned home from her field trip!! She was supposed to be back by now!!”

My shout filled the area with a strange atmosphere.

An eerie sense of camaraderie pressed in on me as if to say “oh, her too”.

But that couldn’t be it. It just couldn’t. That would mean Takkun was missing too!

“Please check. This won’t be a problem if she’s in the school.”

“Yes, but all of the students should have received an email saying the field trip had been canceled.”

“Oh, honestly!!”

I ignored the teacher and jumped over the half-closed gate. He shouted “Hey! Wait!!”, but I looked around the schoolyard and made my way to the building. I removed my shoes, held them in my hand, and ran down the hallway and up the stairs to check each room.

She’s not here.

She’s not here, or here, or here!

“You’re…kidding.”

I pulled out my cellphone and called my aunt, Toujou Midori-san. Takkun had apparently not returned yet. I asked about the security buzzer she carried with her, but it apparently wouldn’t send out a GPS signal unless she pulled the string herself.

That meant we had no clues.

She truly had vanished into thin air.

“No, I must have missed her on the way to the school. That has to be it. If I head back to her house, I should see her on the way.”

I muttered to myself as I returned to the entranceway.

But what if I didn’t find her? What if we missed each other again? How many times would I have to run back and forth before I started thinking of another option?

I held my spinning head with a hand, walked over to the gate, and heard the women shouting again.

“I told you those old people were trouble!!”

“I heard they brought a blade to school last month!”

“Our Megumu was hurt by that old man! Who else could it have been!?”

Those comments caught my attention.

What was going on at this school?

“Um, uh, what do you mean by that?”

“What? You’re still here?”

“Our Takkun might have disappeared! You know how it feels to want to know everything you can, don’t you!?”

I shouted back, and the women fell silent.

Oh, no. I might have talent as a strong-willed old woman.

My worries were cut short by one of the women pouting her lips and answering me.

“We’re talking about those old people. You know who we mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Them! The ones from the Ubasute Apartments!!”

Part 8 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

“Like I said, you are currently on private land managed by our company. Those are condemned buildings and are not meant to function as apartments. Contact the government office and they will tell you the same thing.”

“Yes, but aren’t you keeping the power and water shut off when you know these old people are living here? That counts as willful negligence.”

“I am not aware of anyone living there. No one has submitted a certificate of residence, have they? We have nothing of the sort on record and we are not receiving any rent for that facility. Doesn’t that mean no one is living there?”

“You…!!”

“Let me ask you something: why would we need to send water and power to abandoned buildings? Negligent management? How much private land do you think there is around Japan without a single guard watching over the place? If you pressed charges against everyone who abandoned their property, you wouldn’t have enough detention cells for them all.”

The voice on the phone seemed to be mocking me.

They were used to this. It felt like they were following the arrows on a flowchart prepared in advance.

“You and your company have created an automated execution device or Ubasute Mountain that lets you accept money as these old people die. If the police take this seriously, we’ll crush this system before long.”

“Feel free to try. We would like nothing more than for you to drive out any illegal occupants. But what would happen then?”

“?”

“Where would the old people go once they were driven out? It is none of our concern, but they would probably end up living on the streets. And wouldn’t a lot of the elderly be unable to survive that? Oh, but I guess that’s none of the police’s concern either. You don’t interfere in civil matters, so there’s nothing you can do if someone is withering away on the streets. That’s why you just do your own job. Ah hah hah. You do such a wonderful job of keeping your public and private lives separate.”

They clearly understood everything.

For one thing, the people who stayed in illegal apartments like the Ubasute Apartments tended to be those who could not get a normal apartment. Crushing those corrupt apartments was easy enough, but since the victim had to go somewhere else afterwards, the police would often end up leaving the same victims with fewer and fewer options.

The ancient Ubasute Mountain would have been the same.

It was true the old people would have been too weak to descend the mountain and might have starved to death before long.

But even if they did make it down, what was left for them there?

If they returned to their home, they would be thrown out again. If they went to some other village at the foot of the mountain, who would look after them? With no options left and nowhere to go, they would eventually wither away and breathe their last.

Still, I could not allow this to continue.

All these people had nowhere else to go, so they were being trapped here until they died. They knew exactly what was happening, but they had no way out and could only put up with it.

That was the Ubasute Apartments.

It was a man-eating mountain made of concrete.

To automatically prey on the living, this twisted system had been resurrected in the modern day!

I grabbed my cellphone again and forced out the words.

I was keenly aware that Wankashi Real Estate was my enemy here.

“I will make you regret this.”

“Feel free. Of course, if the police start taking this seriously, I imagine only the illegal residents will be arrested. Regardless, we will be waiting with the best army of lawyers money can buy.”

They hung up and I very nearly crushed the phone in my hand.

“Well, it was pretty suspicious from the moment they gave a cellphone number and not a toll free number or a landline number. And with the 0@0 at the start, it’s probably a throwaway address using an online social game. In the worst case, the phone number might not be enough to track them down.”

“That doesn’t matter. The basic plan hasn’t changed. We need to have this investigated bit by bit.”

Since it had to do with real estate, I called up Department 2.

“Hey, Four Eyes. Ever heard of Wankashi Real Estate?”

“Do you want me to transfer you to the anti-organized crime group? That company doesn’t do any real business, so it doesn’t fit Department 2’s focus on financial crimes.”

“Hey, Heavy Tank. I have a question about Wankashi Real Estate.”

“What, those low level guys? They’re cruel, but they’re small time. You’re after someone pretty boring.”

That annoyed comment came from Sotobori Gaku, a fifth-dan in judo who worked to bring down gangs.

“As you might imagine, they’re the lowest level of a *large criminal organization*. The Japanese branch at the top is the frightening Kiseki Kaikei. They’re into assassination, organ trafficking, murders for life insurance payouts, human trafficking, corpse disposal, and pretty much anything that puts a price tag on a human life.”

“Who’s at the top doesn’t matter right now. Tell me about Wankashi Real Estate themselves.”

“If you want. They excel at buying and selling land for profit, but whenever they make a mistake, they abandon the company and change their name. To be honest, their performance is pretty lackluster.”

“When you say buying and selling land, what exactly do you mean?”

“You’ve heard the stories about what’s happening to abandoned houses lately, right? When one’s been abandoned and no one knows where the owner is, the rights to the house are confiscated, claiming it’s a hotbed for criminal activity or dangerous insects. Wankashi Real Estate uses that to steal the rights to people’s land and house without them even knowing. It’s gotten so forceful that they don’t even have to get the owner to nod their head. There’s even a case where a family spent two weeks in Hawaii for summer vacation and came back to find their house had been taken. Forceful, right?”

“In other words, they don’t have any land of their own?”

“What about it?”

“Have you heard of the Wankashi Camp Apartments in Sugamo?”

“No. I can look into it if you want, but it’s probably their usual MO. They use a single document to swipe ownership of a building that was abandoned because its owner went out of business and it would cost too much to demolish.”

The real estate company had to know this was forceful.

They were grabbing and selling these buildings for some easy money, so they had no real attachment to any of them. I could understand why they didn't care too much if I interfered.

The ancient Ubasute Mountain did not refer to just one place.

It had existed everywhere in Japan.

Was this the same? They had set up an automated execution device to bury family members without guilt. Even if one was shut down or demolished, they could change their methods and product to keep providing the service.

"Oh, right, right. Uchimaku-chan, have you been feeling more popular lately?"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Heh heh heh. But, wow. Someone from a previous case, the daughter of a dead coworker, and a middle school girl. That's like a negative triple seven. If that actually sounds good to you, you have my respect in a backwards sort of way. You do not have an easy life, pretty boy."

He hung up before I could figure out what he was talking about.

And when I turned around, the Mystery Freak was surrounded by a massive curse-like aura.

"Rumble, rumble, rumble. Hey, detective, what was that about, I can think of a girl who fits those criteria, that's clearly Tomoe from my class, when did that start to be a thing, even my information network wasn't able to detect or defend against that one, I need to be more careful. Rumble, rumble rumble."

"Tomoe-chan? Are you completely insane!? No detective would go after a girl he met while working on a case. This isn't a job where you can ask for a girl's number at the funeral!!"

"Um, do you have anywhere to meet girls outside of work?"

"Please stop depressing me!!"

And why are we getting so off topic!? What happened to the Ubasute Apartments driving these old people to death because they have no one left!? No, if Tayama-san was telling the truth, it's because their families actively want them gone!

But even though we had abandoned the old man in the track suit and even though our conversation had taken an inappropriate turn given the gravity of the situation, Tayama Sunao-san did not seem angry.

In fact, the corners of his eyes looked gentler than when we had first seen him.

"It's been so long since I've been around anyone so lively. You reminded me what human life is like."

"…?"

"We're being left to wither away here. We have a place to sleep and to eat, but that's all. We can't leave now. We're monitored until we wither away and then we're

removed. The atmosphere here has completely dried up, so that really took me back. Sorry about smiling like that.”

That was not living.

It was true clothing, food, and shelter were necessary and irreplaceable, but that wasn’t the only nourishment a human needed. If simply breathing and keeping your heart pumping counted as living, then prison would be enough.

Some people without enough to eat would intentionally commit a crime to get arrested. That way they could get the awful prison food. But these people had not taken that route. Nor had they grabbed a blade and taken revenge on the families that abandoned them. If doing anything else would bother someone else, they had decided withering away in their rooms was the best option.

Why were people like that the first ones to be preyed on?

Thirty million people moved throughout Tokyo every day, but not one of them had any connection to these people!

These were the Ubasute Apartments, an automated execution device or a modern man-eating mountain made of concrete. They were essentially being shut in a box while the air was slowly removed, but had these people done anything to deserve that?

“Hey, mister, did you never think about going on public assistance? With that money and a guarantor company, you might be able to find a proper place to live.”

“I told you my family abandoned me, didn’t I? On paper, I have land and a house. I even have my own bank account. But in reality, my son and his wife have hidden the bankbook and deed from me. So no assistance program will determine I need any help.”

They had wanted the house and they had not wanted him to insist he had the rights to it, so they wanted him gone as soon as possible.

And so they had abandoned their own relative using the new version of Ubasute Mountain that existed in the middle of the nation’s capital.

…I can’t believe them.

“Besides, public assistance is the tax money of strangers, right? Then no thank you. I’m not going to take other people’s money just to extend what little life I have left.”

No, that isn’t how you’re supposed to think about public assistance.

It was true there some idiots who illegally accepted payments because they didn’t want to work or because it paid more than a part-time job, but why focus on them? When someone had nowhere else to turn and they needed an opportunity to get back on their feet, what was wrong with asking for help? Wasn’t that what it meant to support each other? And if the taxes taken from the people weren’t given back to the people, what would be the point?

“We don’t need anything.”

No.

“We have complaints and we could only agree if you asked us if we were angry about any of this, but what’s the point? We don’t have much life left, so why make a fuss that will only make the younger generation suffer? What will that accomplish? So we don’t need anything. Just leave us alone.”

No, no, no!!

Everything about that was wrong, but I couldn’t find the words to argue back. The person I needed to save was right in front of me, but he wasn’t asking for help. I couldn’t tell what would actually hit home for him.

With how long Tayama-san and the others had suffered here, I would probably get some decent hints toward judging the true monsters behind this if I asked them for details.

And yet they would never help me do that. Not as things were anyway. That was clearly true of Tayama-san, but Nezu-san, who had told me the story of Akasabi-san, had not said a word about her own circumstances here. I had revealed I was a police officer, so if she truly wanted help, she would have started by telling me about the situation in the Ubasute Apartments. Even when the elevator had fallen, I hadn’t heard a peep from anyone. It was a matter of life or death and yet the only reaction was wondering who would be next.

These old people were not maliciously hiding the crimes being committed.

They just didn’t want to cause any trouble.

They were sealing away their own lives in a twisted form of self-sacrifice.

They were just like the old people who had been abandoned in the mountains by the children they had raised.

They felt betrayed, they were filled with despair, they thought they must have done something wrong raising them, and they found themselves rejecting every part of their lives. And in the end, they lost even the will to live.

What was I supposed to do? There resignation and weariness was as heavy as the fog hanging over a damp mountain, so how could I get them moving again? The words of some young stranger wouldn’t be enough. I needed something bigger that was guaranteed to shake their hearts.

At that very moment, I heard a scream from directly overhead. It seemed to have been forced from a dried throat.

“What!?”

“That was close by. That old lady’s room had thin walls, so I’d guess that was on the third or fourth floor.”

While I looked blankly up at the ceiling, the Mystery Freak calmly analyzed the situation. And for some reason, Tayama-san looked sad. I didn’t know what had happened, but I ended the conversation and made my way to the stairs with the Mystery Freak. Then I ran up them.

A small crowd had formed in the fourth floor hallway.

When I got closer, I saw an old woman in an apron lying face down on the floor. She was the one who had told us about Akasabi-san.

“Nezu-san!? Dammit!!”

I crouched down and frantically rolled her onto her back. I didn’t see any obvious injuries or bleeding, but she was as unmoving as a doll packed with dirt. I placed a hand near her mouth and two fingers on her neck. She wasn’t breathing and she didn’t have a pulse.

What the hell happened!? Did her heart suddenly give out!?

“Does anyone know any medical conditions Nezu-san had!? Anyone at all!?”

I shouted to the surrounding old people, but none of them answered. But this wasn’t them being coldhearted.

“We haven’t been to a hospital in years. None of us know what’s going on in our bodies.”

No help there either. We were in the middle of Tokyo, but I felt so isolated I would have thought we were abandoned deep in the mountains. It wasn’t surprising given their situation, but we felt so far away. Why were they hated so much?

“Mystery Freak, you call an ambulance. I’ll try CPR!!”

As I shouted to the girl, I pulled handkerchief from my pocket, placed it over Nezu-san’s mouth, and placed my mouth over that. I pinched her nose with my fingers and blew air into her lungs. Then I placed my right hand in the center of her chest, placed my left hand over it, made sure not to put too much weight on her, and started making chest compressions.

26, 27, 28, 29, 30!

I breathed into the old woman’s mouth again.

How much time had passed since she collapsed? I knew the odds of success with CPR dropped considerably which each minute, so I could only hope I’d made it in time.

Meanwhile, the Mystery Freak grimaced with her smartphone to her ear.

“What is it, Mystery Freak?”

I continued making rhythmic chest compressions, but she did not answer me and simply switched the phone to speaker phone.

“You’re talking about those Ubasute Apartments, aren’t you? We don’t have the time to deal with some lonely old person. Listen, if you call 119 for such a ridiculous reason again, we’ll press charges!”

What are they talking about?

My mind immediately started to boil over, but then it hit me. There was clearly something wrong here. All emergency calls were recorded, so this person was wrapping the noose around their own neck if something happened. That seemed like too much of a risk even if they did hate the old people here.

Or was there something pushing them in that direction? Was there some kind of system being used to isolate the old people?

“It doesn’t matter.”

I spat out the words and continued breathing into Nezu-san’s mouth.

She had gotten angry easily, but she had politely told us what we wanted to know. Both with the elevator and Enbi’s outfit, she had scolded us for our own good. She had taken on an unpopular role out of concern for complete strangers. She wasn’t just a doll or a name on a document. She was a human being.

I wasn’t going to let her die here.

Everyone would die eventually. That was unavoidable.

But they didn’t have to be carried to death on a conveyer belt.

With all the Youkai filling this country, it may have been wrong to call humans the greatest form of life, but couldn’t we have something?

Couldn’t humans have some small hint of pride and respect?

Please open your eyes! Please, please, please!!!!!!

“…Ah…”

Not even I knew how many times I had repeated the process, but a hoarse sound finally escaped Nezu Yuki-san’s throat.

“Cough!! Cough!! Cough!?”

When I saw her coughing and removing the handkerchief from her own mouth, I fell back into a sitting position. My hands were stinging. The heart was a mass of muscle and I only now realized how heard it was to externally support its movements.

At first, Nezu-san didn’t seem to know what had happened.

But when she looked around, it seemed to come into focus for her. She held her hurting chest, slowly sat up, and looked to me.

She gave a thin smile.

“You didn’t have to help me, you know?”

Like I would let that happen.

How many times has this happened!? How many times has someone collapsed without anyone noticing, with no ambulance coming, or even with no one finding them until months later? Have they done anything wrong? They’ve lived their lives to their fullest, worked hard, raised children, paid their taxes, and supported the backbone of this country, so why do they have to go through this!? Why do they have to have their own children abandon them in this concrete mountain without feeling even a twinge of guilt!? It’s like they’ve been thrown into the back of the garbage truck!! Even the information concerning them deteriorates until they only leave a

rumor like that Akasabi-san!! What the hell is this? What the hell are these Ubasute Apartments!?

"…"

I also saw Tayama-san in his track suit after he finally caught up through the crowd.

When our eyes met, he silently shook his head. His eyes were telling me not to investigate any further.

Do you really think I could stop now?

Even if I didn't have any more hints and even if the victims weren't asking for help, how could a police officer not continue investigating when he saw something so cruel and heartless?

That was when something interrupted.

My cellphone began to ring. I checked the screen and found an unfamiliar number. I frowned and answered. The phones issued to police officers were convenient because I could instantly turn things around on any scammers who called.

And when this unknown caller spoke, it was with a young girl's voice.

"D-Detect-…Detective! Um, it's me, Tomoe! It's Hachikawa Tomoe!! Um, dammit, my mind is going blank… Anyway, come here right away!! I have something important to tell you!!"

Part 9 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

We parted ways with Tayama Sunao-san, the old man in a track suit, and left the Ubasute Apartments. As we walked back down the winding brick road in the manmade woods, I sensed obvious malice.

"This narrow, winding road… Detective, you couldn't get a car down here, could you? Even using a bike or motorcycle would be dangerous with all the bumps from these roots. Those old people have weak legs and backs, so they're trapped here and kept from shopping properly."

"Look, meaningless height differences have been added in to prevent anyone from leaving the road and cutting straight through. These are two or three meter stone walls made with modern technology."

Walking back and forth on this horrible road would wear down the old people. That would prevent them from purchasing as much food or other items for everyday life. And without food, they would be even further worn down. It was practically a deadly mountain path.

"And Tayama-san was collecting rainwater in buckets because drinking water is precious. Does that mean what I think it does?"

"They can't rely on the tap water since it can be shut off without warning. Are you suggesting they use the rainwater after filtering it? But aren't the clouds over the city full of exhaust fumes? And even water goes bad, so you can't store it forever in buckets like that."

I couldn’t believe it either, but an unimaginable situation was underway in those Ubasute Apartments. It was still happening.

“But supermarkets and convenience stores deliver these days, right? Tayama-san and Nezu-san were both dressed well enough, so they have some money to spare, don’t they? Why don’t they use something like that?”

“There may be some kind of trap keeping them from escaping or asking anyone for help.”

The ancient Ubasute Mountain had been considered a sacred place. Even as you threw someone away there, you would clasp your hands in fear that they would hold a grudge. In the same way, the Ubasute Apartments were set up to be isolated from Tokyo as a whole.

“Anyway, we have no more clues at the moment. We need to cool our heads and might as well deal with whatever Tomoe-chan needs. This is the problem with reality. You don’t get to focus on a single case like in the police dramas.”

“Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble.”

“And why did a dark aura envelop you as soon as I brought up Tomoe-chan? I get the feeling you’re about to shoot red light from your eyes. And stop swinging your scarf around like a morning star. Um, what is that thing? A Rokuro Dog? You’re going to stretch it.”

“It isn’t a Rokuro Dog! It’s Suneky the Sunekosuri!!”

Oddly enough, Hachikawa Tomoe-chan had asked me to meet her at an elementary school in Sugamo.

I found her near the school’s gate in a beige blazer. A young man who seemed to be a teacher was with her.

Right off the bat, Tomoe-chan put her hands on her hips and puffed out her cheeks.

“Honestly!! You’re way, way, *way* too late! This is an emergency, so why didn’t you drive up with sirens blaring!? Why are you on foot!?”

“Tooomoooeee…. I’d like to have a word with you. If you don’t answer honestly, I’ll have to break out my mongoose style. Shahhh!!”

I ignored the idiot and asked what was going on.

“Um, what exactly did you need in such a hurry?”

“It’s a super emergency!!”

“Super?”

“Super super!!”

That ridiculous exchange showed just how panicked she was.

But the next thing she said was more than enough to make someone panic.

“My cousin Takkun – Toujou Takumi-chan – is missing! No, it’s not just her. About five kids in the group she always hangs out with have gone missing!!”

What!? This is no joking matter! This has suddenly turned into a kidnapping!?

All my hair stood on end, but the teacher used a handkerchief to wipe sweat from his brow and corrected her with a weak smile.

“We don’t know for sure they’ve been kidnapped. They just haven’t been seen at home or school.”

“So there’s no reason to think there’s been a crime?”

“The students were looking forward to the field trip. It was only to a nature park a few train stations away. I thought they might have been upset the field trip was cancelled and left on their own, so I’ve contacted the campground. Simply put, the children aren’t missing because something happened. They’re sticking to the original plan even after something happened and those plans were canceled.”

I wanted to know whether the teacher actually believed that or simply didn’t want to cause a bigger commotion, but it was hard to tell just from the look on his face.

Meanwhile, Tomoe-chan could not seem to calm down.

“We’re not talking about middle schoolers like us! They’re in elementary school! They can’t go camping on their own! They wouldn’t even be able to get food for themselves! And someone would notice!!”

“The children have made curry in cooking class and we had prepared a fair amount of portable food. Besides, children seem to like restrictive environments. They’ll climb under the kotatsu or gather in the cold, cramped space under the stairs. And I’m not sure how serious the other parents are about this being kidnapping. None of them have called the police yet. I would rather not say this, but I doubt they actually think this is such a big deal. Or rather, I think they’re afraid of having this turn out to be nothing after they make a huge deal out of it.”

There were idiots who called the police for ridiculous reasons like “there’s a cockroach in my room” or “it’s hot, so go buy me a popsicle”. The recordings would be aired on TV during a year-end special, but the opposite happened too. Some people would be too afraid of being embarrassed and fail to call during an obvious emergency.

“That’s why I called in the detective. If it’s nothing, he can just leave. And if there is something to it, he can deal with it as soon as possible. Can you do that?”

“I have no reason to say no.”

“Sigh… If that’s what you want to do, but make sure you say she was the one that reported this. Honestly, all of the parents and guardians are too on edge. In fact, everyone in this area seems to be.”

“?”

I frowned and the teacher shrugged.

“Well, I only transferred here recently, so maybe I just haven’t gotten used to the atmosphere yet.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Whenever something even slightly strange happens – for example, a stray cat tearing open a trash bag or a tree in someone’s yard dying due to improper care – for some reason, they allllll blame the old people from those apartments. They’re doing the same thing with these disappearances. I am worried about the children who never showed up at school, but their accusations are way off base. Taking them seriously has only wasted our precious time and scared all of you.”

“Wait. Mister, what do the Ubasute Apartments have to do with this?”

“Besides, those old people only ever stopped by to teach the children origami or how to make bamboo copters. …Sorry, what was that?”

“I was asking why you had brought up the Ubasute Apartments.”

The Mystery Freak slowly repeated herself and the teacher responded as if this was all perfectly normal.

“Have you ever heard of extramural exchange lessons? Basically, people rent out the classrooms and schoolyard afterschool and tell old stories or teach the kids how to make crafts. Normal citizens take part to teach the kids about the local area and its history.”

“Um, what about it?”

“The old people from those apartments were helping with that. But then an old man named Tayama brought a small sword into the school, claiming it was to teach the kids how to make bamboo copters.”

“Oh,” I groaned.

If a sensitive helicopter parent saw that, it would create a misunderstanding on the level of false molestation accusations on a train.

“One of the students cut their finger, so it caused quite an uproar. In the end, the extramural exchange lessons were canceled indefinitely.”

“So those old people are hated because of that?”

“No, that was only the last straw. The people here, well, for some reason they’re very sensitive when it comes to the old people of those apartments. They’re always on edge about them. The housewives use their cellphones and a private website to work together and upload the location of any of the old people they run across. They’re marking out the range of those old people’s everyday lives like they’re criminals. I don’t see how the old people can go shopping like that. And I can’t tell you why everyone hates them so much.”

It was certainly a strange situation, but Tomoe-chan gave even more information.

“My aunt was like that too. She normally never badmouths anyone, but she had no problem badmouthing the old people from those apartments like it was nothing.”

“Hey, Mystery Freak.”

“What a coincidence, detective. I was just thinking Wankashi Real Estate might have something to do with this.”

Something was isolating those people.

Something was affecting the locals who had lived here for a long time but not affecting outsiders like us.

Something was separating out those old people even in the great metropolis of Tokyo.

I knew speculation could be dangerous, but I was having trouble connecting this kidnapping with the old people who would rather disappear than cause anyone any trouble. For one thing, if the parents were constantly monitoring those old people with their private site, they couldn’t possibly have kidnapped anyone.

But…

“Was there any deeper connection between the old people and the children? What did the children think of the extramural exchange lessons? Were they as harsh to the old people as the other locals?”

“Not at all. If the children hadn’t like it, those old people would have stopped coming. They were volunteers, so it wasn’t their job or anything.”

“Did the children and the old people get along?”

“Yes, I even have proof. I probably shouldn’t show you this for privacy reasons, but I can make an exception for a police officer.”

After that, we ended up following the teacher toward the school building. I exchanged a few words with the Mystery Freak as he guided us.

“What do you think?”

“It’s hard to say. And Mystery Freak, you aren’t trying to say the missing children really have something to do with those old people, are you?”

“Not that. I’m thinking this might have to do with Wankashi Real Estate.”

“Wait…”

“The managers of the Ubasute Apartments wanted to isolate those old people, so they wouldn’t have been a fan of those extramural exchange lessons.”

“So they kidnapped the children to silence them? That isn’t how they do things. Their client asks them to kill off the target, but they let them wither away in the abandoned buildings without taking any direct action. They’ve constructed a modern Ubasute Mountain, so I doubt they would dirty their own hands like that.”

“What if something happened that forced their hand?”

The teacher did not head for the main entranceway. The faculty room was apparently on the first floor and we cut through a small side door as a more direct route.

After some rummaging around inside, the teacher returned.

He carried a few dozen A4-sized papers.

“I found them. This is what I was talking about. This should show that the children had accepted those old people. To be honest, I was taken aback when I first saw these, but this is what they really think. I just have to accept that.”

I thought these were some kind of document, but they were not.

I flipped through the papers while the Mystery Freak and Tomoe-chan leaned in from either side.

“I can’t believe this,” I finally said.

Those old people were trapped in the Ubasute Apartments and some children had suddenly vanished on the way to school.

Those two incidents fit together perfectly.

Part 10 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

We went right back to the Ubasute Apartments. Hachikawa Tomoe-chan must have been worried about her cousin Takumi-chan because she followed us.

It was already evening and each second that passed felt like wasted time.

Tayama Sunao-san must have liked gardening because he was out weeding the flower garden.

He was one of the old people who could not descend the deadly mountain even though he knew how it worked.

“What are you doing here? I thought I told you to leave us alone.”

“I can’t do that. Anyway, this might take a while. I know questioning you is impolite, but is there anywhere we can speak more comfortably.”

“Fine. Then come with me.”

He didn’t like it, but the man did not drive us away. As he had mentioned before, he really did like this lively atmosphere. He showed us the way to the large rec room on the first floor of the apartment building. It was probably meant for eating snacks while chatting. It had plenty of tables and chairs, but the drink and bread vending machines by the window were powered down.

We sat at one table and I started by listing five names.

“Igami Susumu-kun, Nagamaki Megumu-chan, Umesaka Satoshi-kun, Kayama Hayate-kun…and Toujou Takumi-chan. Do you recognize those names?”

“Those names… What about them?”

“They’ve disappeared.”

At first, the old man didn’t seem to know what I meant. But understanding gradually seeped into his mind and his face paled.

The Mystery Freak and Tomoe-chan had decided to simply listen for the time being.

The adults, Tayama-san and me, were the only ones to speak.

“I have of course submitted a search request and made emergency arrangements, but that alone is not enough. I don’t like to admit it, but randomly searching a wide area without narrowing down the possibilities is a good way to not find what you’re looking for. So I want your help. I want you to narrow down the possibilities.”

“I’ll do anything if it means saving those children…but what can I do?”

“Wankashi Real Estate,” I cut in. “I want to convince the higher ups they’re involved and focus on them, but I don’t have enough data at the moment. So I want your knowledge. You know how they work.”

“Wait a second. Those people are attacking those of us in these apartments. What would they have to do with the children!?”

“Tayama-san, we’ve heard about the extramural exchange lessons. That had to be the one remaining joy for you before the incident with the sword.”

He had smiled and said it had been a long time since he’d been around “anyone so lively”.

He had not been recalling his son and daughter-in-law who had abandoned him in this concrete mountain. He had probably been thinking of the contact with those children during the extramural exchange lessons.

On those days, during that short time, those old people’s hearts may have briefly descended from the deadly mountain.

“How do you think all that looked to the children? Did you ever think about that?”

“Well…to be honest, I’m not sure. They may have been interested in my old stories or they may have been bored by them. I was really only volunteering for my own self-satisfaction. As long as I was happy, I didn’t ask for anything else.”

He was interrupted by a rustling sound.

I had taken out the papers the teacher had given me and I had placed them on the table.

“Then look through these. This will explain everything.”

“These?”

He reached his wrinkled hands toward the papers.

That kind of paper was almost never used in the modern age of word processors.

They were writing papers.

“The school asked them to write about an adult they looked up to. The teachers probably wanted them to write about their parents or teachers. Apparently, parents’ day was approaching, so they wanted to show these off to the parents. …But it didn’t go as planned.”

“…”

“One student wrote about the old woman who would tell them old stories. One wrote about the old man who taught them how to play kendama or otedama. One wrote about the old man who taught them how to make bamboo copters. The entire class wrote about all of you. In the end, the teachers didn’t hang these up on the wall to make sure the parents didn’t see them. The parents are unnecessarily hostile toward the people in these apartments, after all.”

“…”

“But you got through to them. Just as you were saved by teaching those kids, they were saved by learning from you. And that’s why the children noticed something from their contact with you. And they couldn’t ignore it. They saw some old people trapped in some invisible system and they decided to save you.”

“…”

At first glance, the essays seemed to talk about how amazing, interesting, and kind the old people were.

But that wasn’t all.

At points, something more was present:

“They don’t seem very happy. I’m really worried.”

“Someone’s being mean to them. I can’t let that happen.”

“I’ll save her. We’re making a secret group to do that.”

And that led to my conclusion.

“While the children were pretending to be detectives after school, the must have stumbled upon the truth. They found something Wankashi Real Estate can’t allow to get out. So the company was forced to act directly to silence them. They disappeared around the time of the canceled field trip, so that’s about two days. Please help us! It’s the only way to save the children who were trying to save you!!”

Even I knew that was not a fair way to ask.

If Wankashi Real Estate was destroyed, the old people might lose their illegal home here. The people abandoned in the Ubasute Mountain would have no one to rely on in a new town, so they had no one at all and could not hope for a place to live. I knew that, but I tried to do my job even if it meant crushing these old people’s lives underfoot.

And yet…

“Fine. I’ll convince the others, so ask whatever you want. I never really wanted to live too long anyway, but it’s been a while since I had a reason not to die right away.”

The old man did not hesitate in the slightest.

This was not an abandoned life.

I was clearly speaking with a living human being.

“So please. If it will increase the odds of saving those children in the slightest, I am willing to bet my life on it.”

Part 11 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Tayama Sunao-san admitted he had heard this was related to a Yamanba.

“I don’t know what exactly that means, but it seems to be what isolates the Ubasute Apartments. It creates trouble going shopping, isolation from the neighbors, false accusations, a bad reputation, and any number of other things. It seems to mainly affect the negative emotions of those outside the apartments.”

A Yamanba was an old lady Youkai that lived in the mountains. They were famous for eating people, but there were also legends of them giving advice to the villagers and providing excellent hospitality.

“But how is a Yamanba involved? I doubt the system simply places the apartments as Ubasute Mountain and the old people as the Yamanba.”

“Let’s go over what information we have, detective. For one, what kinds of things are happening between the apartments and the surrounding area?”

“The local people have an excessive hatred of the old people here, right? But outsiders like us or the teacher who only recently moved here aren’t affected. The children aren’t either.”

“There’s one more thing,” cut in Tomoe-chan. “Whenever they try to explain something, it ends up becoming a rumor about how those old people have harmed them. Something turns those old people into aggressors in their minds.”

“The Yamanba is a well-known Youkai, so there are a lot of different legends. But there’s one that’s caught my interest.”

“?”

“Whenever they do something bad, it tends to be trying to eat someone, but sometimes they bring widespread disease or disaster instead. There’s a story about that in Tokyo even. When a Yamanba attacked, someone shot her with an arrow and killed her, but a great curse came from her corpse and filled the village with disease. In the end, they chopped her corpse into forty-two pieces, made a burial mound for each one, and sealed them inside the mounds in order. That brought an end to the curse.”

Widespread disease.

Something the locals naturally detested.

Something that allowed the old people to be aggressors while also being fragile corpses.

It did fit the situation.

Just as no one wanted to approach the rotting corpse at the source of the disease, this malice amplification Package made the locals hate the Ubasute Apartments and the old people living there.

At the very least, it fit the image surrounding the Ubasute Apartments more than the monstrous Yamanba that chased travelers around with a knife or the hard to please Yamanba that gave advice to the villagers.

I decided to assume this was the type of Yamanba that spread a curse after death.

“But wouldn’t that mean Wankashi Real Estate is using a corpse as part of their Package!?”

“That isn’t all that surprising,” said Tayama-san. “A person or two is found dead here every month. Not even those of us who live here know how many have died in all.”

“I’m not so sure that’s it,” said the Mystery Freak. “A corpse that can be carried out and cremated lacks the permanence needed for a Package component. It’s possible the role is passed on each time someone else dies, but they have no guarantee they can secure a corpse at a moment’s notice. When someone dies generally comes down to luck. In that case, the role of the corpse was probably given to something more stable and permanent.”

“L-like what? Is there something creepy hidden in these apartments?”

Tomoe-chan’s shoulders tensed as she asked that, but I had already found the answer.

So I gave it.

“Akasabi-san. Everyone here knows the story as something they don’t want to happen to them, but no one knows who that person was before they died. It’s a faceless corpse that had to have been here but that no one knows anything more about.”

It was Tayama-san who objected to that.

“But how are you going to investigate Akasabi-san? Not even I know which room they lived in. Or more accurately, there are too many theories to know for sure.”

“Can you write out all of the candidates you can think of, mister?”

“I suppose…”

The old man began writing building and room numbers on a piece of paper. At first glance, it looked like a strange code.

“That’s about it.”

“Now then, mister, which of these are obvious fakes that have nothing to do with someone who died alone? How many in all?”

“Wait a second… In all it would be…forty-two of them. …Ah!?”

“Yes, the same number as the burial mounds used to seal the Yamanba’s disease.”

Part 12 (Hachikawa Tomoe)

To be honest, the detective and Enbi’s verbal game of catch was too fast for me to follow. I could only watch on in confusion as the two of them dug even further toward the truth.

“But wait. If the Yamanba’s corpse has been chopped up and sealed in the mounds, wouldn’t that end the disease? Wankashi Real Estate wants to spread the disease to isolate these old people, so that doesn’t fit.”

“Detective, were you even listening to what I said? To end the disease, you need to chop the Yamanba’s corpse up into forty-two pieces and seal them in the forty-two mounds ‘in order’.”

“You mean…if you intentionally get the order wrong…”

“The disease continues. And at the same time, it lets you correct the order to stop the Package if something unexpected occurs. That’s the ideal Package assembly, isn’t it?”

That seemed to convince them, but I was still confused.

“D-do you mean forty-two of the rooms count as burial mounds and something is hidden in each one? But how many options are there for rearranging those things in the right order! That goes well beyond the possibilities for a cellphone passcode!!”

“But it’s better than nothing. At the very least, we can try.”

“Also, what even is it that’s hidden in this Akasabi-san person’s room!?”

“That’s what we’re about to find out.”

The detective and Enbi stood up at the exact same moment and ran off somewhere. I was still confused, but the old man in a track suit simply shrugged. I bowed and then ran after the other two.

Meanwhile, I felt a strange sense of impatience.

I was afraid of being left behind and I didn’t understand the world those two lived in.

They ran up to the second floor, opened one of the many doors lining the hallway, and stepped inside the room. The evening sun dyed the empty room in the bright colors of a lonely mountain and the two of them wordlessly worked together to search the room.

“Hey, detective. What do you actually think is hidden here?”

“A tooth implant.”

“That’s pretty cliché. I’m expecting some hair.”

By sitting on the detective’s shoulders in her swimsuit-like outfit, Enbi found something in the wiring space above the ceiling.

“Found it. This is…an artificial bone maybe?”

She set it on the floor wrapped in a handkerchief and we all looked down at it.

Um, what is this? Its smooth like glass and it looks like a piece of some kind of ceramic.

“This is what they call a murder without a corpse.”

When I looked puzzled, he explained further.

“These days, you can charge someone with murder even if they dissolved the bones in a bathtub full of powerful acid. You just need some proof that a corpse was there: bloodstains, implants, hair, or artificial bones.”

“Fortunately, artificial bones tend to be made from glass. They don’t dissolve in acid and they don’t burn in fires. That’s apparently really helped the prosecution in a ton of cases.”

Which also meant…

“Hey, what would happen if there wasn’t a murder but you scattered these artificial bones around the scene and prank called the police?”

“Unfortunately, it would be investigated as a murder. And of course, you would receive more than just a talking to once they found out what you did.”

That was what was happening in these apartments. A single artificial bone had been broken into pieces and hidden in the rooms to pass it off as physical evidence that someone had died here. That false information and nonexistent corpse were being used as the core of a Package.

It was all being used to match the legend of the Yamanba’s corpse being cut into forty-two pieces and buried in mounds.

That sped things up. We ended up searching out all of the artificial bone pieces in the rooms.

There were supposedly a total of forty-two, but…

“Hey, detective, what do you think the children found?”

“They weren’t doing a forensic investigation and they weren’t making some grand deductions. I’m guessing they found something by foot.”

“More specifically?”

“They set out to find a weakness in the Package and they actually did. …It amplified the local adults’ malice toward the old people, but it didn’t affect the kids. Most likely, they knew the old people were reasonable people if you didn’t hold any prejudices and just spoke with them.”

“Didn’t the Yamanba of the forty-two burial mounds eat children?”

“And how did she do that?”

“By copying their mother’s voice and asking them to open the door late at night. After cracking the door to check, they saw the frightening Yamanba, so the children fired an arrow at her to kill her before they were eaten.”

“In other words, the children got scared and killed her without listening to what she had to say. I’m not about to complain about an old story or legend, but she might not have actually intended to kill them. It might have been a simple prank. …And the curse she spread after her death may have come from her frustration with the situation.”

“Then…”

“What Toujou Takumi-chan and the others did was the same as opening the door and talking to her instead of launching a preemptive strike out of fear. That threatened to destroy the field of isolation, so Wankashi Real Estate had to do something about it. That’s my guess anyway.”

The two of them sounded really cool as they reasoned through the situation, but Enbi was acting weird.

“Pant, pant. D-detective…This is as far as I can go…”

Even if we couldn’t use the elevators, Enbi was already exhausted by the fourth or fifth floor.

And the detective was coldhearted.

“I’ll leave you here.”

“Eh? Ah!? Wait!!”

I was the one that shouted and ran after him. I looked back to find Enbi weakly waving up at us.

“You’re kidding… You’re really leaving her behind!?”

“The residents of these apartments aren’t dangerous. They only seem to be due to the filter placed over them by the Yamanba Package.”

That may be true, but that’s not the issue here! What kind of man abandons a maiden in love to run off to work!? Not that I’m one to talk as I run after him despite knowing how Enbi feels!!

Astonished, I chased after him and had a thought.

Had “he” been like this too?

That man had given no thought to his family as he chased after every case presented to him. Eventually, my mom had run out of patience with him. I had only ever seen his back, but had his eyes been focused on people who needed help but could not seek it?

He really had been a hopeless man, but I did admire that at least a little.

Was that what it meant to be a police detective?

By the time we checked the forty-two rooms and found all forty-two pieces of the artificial bone, the colors of evening had darkened to those of night. I sent an email to Enbi and we all met up in an empty room to assemble the glass pieces like a jigsaw puzzle. We finally constructed a silhouette that looked perfect for a dog to hold in its mouth.

“Is this a tibia?”

“It doesn’t matter. More importantly, look here. It gives the manufacturer and a production number.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll search for it. …Ashigara Sports Manufacturing, sprinting artificial bone series, #3-52-6. Hm? I have good news, detective. This was first released two years ago.”

“Okay, we’ve got them now.”

“Eh? Eh?”

I couldn’t keep up, so the detective said more.

“Wankashi Real Estate insists this property has been abandoned for a long time so they didn’t know the old people were living here or that shutting off the power or water would kill people. …And yet this artificial bone is from only two years ago. The old people had to have been living here then, so the Wankashi Real Estate person who visited had to know they were here.”

“That means they can be charged with willful neglect. There’s no way they’ll be found not guilty.”

“No matter how good their lawyers are, they can’t escape this. And if the full power of the police is sent after them, we’re sure to find the missing children.”

Part 13 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

The artificial bone fragments were important pieces of evidence, but if they were not placed in the empty rooms in order, the unfair criticism of the old people would never end. At the same time, the missing children had to be found as soon as possible. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I called in some uniformed police officers to deal with the artificial bones. They only had to place them back around the apartments, retrieve them again, and send them over to the forensic investigators.

“The legend says the Yamanba’s burial mounds were built from east to west, right? Should I have them arrange the artificial bone pieces from top to bottom and then place them in the empty rooms starting from the first floor of the building’s east end and up to the top floor? And if that doesn’t do anything, they can try some other arrangements like starting from the bottom of the bone or starting from the top floor.”

I tried to figure out what instructions to give and the Mystery Freak cut in from the side.

“But detective, the Yamanba isolation Package spreads enough false malice for them to refuse to send out an ambulance. Are you sure the police will show up?”

“It only works on the locals. When you call for an ambulance, you’re automatically connected to the closest center, but that isn’t necessarily true with the police. …I just have to go over their heads and call my own workplace directly.”

And so I dialed my cellphone.

“Yes, department chief? I found something incredible while investigating those old people who died alone. Yes, including the cases of attempted murder, this was a plan to kill all two thousand people in these apartments. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Bfhh!?”

“This goes well beyond a mass stabbing or shooting on the streets. This is seriously going to go down in Japan’s criminal history. So if you don’t want the local station to get all the credit, you should probably get down here pretty quick. Yes, yes. I suggest sending quite a bit of backup. Bye bye.”

After passing on only the necessary information, I hung up.

The setup was complete. It was time to head for Wankashi Real Estate.

“Enbi, you wait here with Tomoe-chan. When the police arrive, explain everything that happened.”

“Ehhh!? But the arrest of the criminal is the best part of the mystery drama!!”

“A sweaty firefight isn’t your field of expertise. …Hachikawa-san, you keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn’t try anything. That would be a huge help.”

“W-well, if you say so, detective… Mumble mumble…”

“Oh, that’s right! Tooomoooeee!! This is the perfect opportunity! We need to have a nice long chat!!”

With that, I said goodbye to Tayama-san and the others, left the Mystery Freak with them as she swung her Sunekosuri scarf around like a morning star, and got down to making the actual arrest while contacting some colleagues of mine.

Wankashi Real Estate was located in Ikebukuro, quite near Sugamo.

In an area filled with short, narrow multi-tenant buildings, I approached one of the cars parked on the side of the road, and climbed into the passenger seat.

Sotobori Gaku, heavy tank of the organized crime countermeasure division, waited inside.

“Great job. But are you sure you should be getting our help? I thought Department 1 was the most territorial group in the world. The higher ups are going to be bitching in the conference room.”

“Wankashi Real Estate is the bottom level of *a large criminal organization*, right? That makes this your territory, so you can make the arrest. Besides, the missing children come first. The credit can come later.”

“Why in the world didn’t you ask to join the juvenile crime division? …Oh, right. Here.”

Sotobori Gaku casually passed me a standard issue revolver.

“You can still lend these things out?”

“Maybe you elites in Department 1 can’t, but outlaws like us do it all the time.”

“Crap, maybe I shouldn’t have asked you for help.”

Meanwhile, we shared some information and discussed our strategy.

“Simply put, everyone in that five-story building except for the convenience store on the ground floor is probably guilty of something. Wankashi is the tenant on the third floor, but if we surround the building, the other tenants might think we’re after them and attack us. So let’s play it by ear and arrest them all! That should settle it!!”

“Could you be any more sloppy!? Are you really part of Japan’s police force!?”

We ended up yelling at each other as we got out of the car. That was the cue for men in suits to step out of other cars around the parking lot. It was not often that Department 1 and the organized crime countermeasure division worked together. Some of the cars attached police lights to the roof and set up a blockade on the road.

The Heavy Tank swaggered up to the multi-tenant building while laughing fiercely for some reason.

“I love this tense atmosphere. This is a real man’s workplace.”

“Keep saying things like that and the women are going to yell at you again.”

“Yeah, but it’s the policewomen in uniform I like, not the ones in suits like us.”

“And that’s what they don’t like. Why do you think your division is nothing but men?”

“Oh? And can you claim to know everything there is to know about women?”

At that point, the lights suddenly went out on that nighttime street.

At first, my vision went dark like when the lights went out in a room, but we were outside. This was not just a building or two. It was a widespread and largescale blackout.

“Hey, Uchimaku-chan, what do you think about this?”

“I just hope they didn’t have a remote-controlled bomb at the transformer substation.”

“Switch from cellphones to radios. The local tower is down, so the phones won’t work.”

“Either way, they can’t stop us now. Listen up, everyone, don’t let Wankashi escape! Let’s go!!”

We were forced to use the car headlights for light, but they didn’t help inside the building. We could barely see as we climbed the stairs to the third floor.

Someone unsteadily stepped out onto the landing.

“Secured!! Next!”

After twisting the man’s hands behind his back and forcing him to the ground, I left him with another police officer and continued on. It was violent, but we were allowed to secure everyone on the scene when we didn’t know who our enemy was and could be stabbed in the back at any moment. Of course, anything that killed them wasn’t allowed.

“Hey, isn’t that silhouette pregnant?”

“She’s got something stuffed under her clothes. No pregnant woman stands that straight. Secured!! Next!”

We arrived at the third floor. The darkness actually made it more frightening, but we gathered in front of one door with guns in hand.

I cleared my throat and made a suggestion.

“I’ll kick down the door.”

“No fair! That’s the best part! You Department 1 credit thief!!”

“I said I was giving you the arrest, didn’t I? Now, let’s go!”

I forcefully kicked open the door and we poured inside. A young man who seemed to be on phone duty raised his hands in the darkness, but I didn’t see anyone else. Sotobori clicked his tongue after moving further back.

“Oh, damn. The safe is sitting open. This might be bad!!”

We had tried to seal off all the exits, but there was only so much we could do in the confusion of the sudden blackout. They may have gotten the upper hand and slipped out somewhere. If they had night vision equipment prepared, it was entirely possible.

That was when I heard the low roar of an engine down below.

Sotobori shouted into his radio.

“Stop them!!”

“We can’t complete the barricade of cars due to that blackout!!”

I couldn’t let them escape. I had to bring an end to those old people’s suffering in the Ubasute Apartments. I had to find the children who had disappeared after discovering their secret!

“Wait. Uchimaku-chan?”

“…”

I could judge the car’s position from the sound and I didn’t have time to hesitate.

I ran through the darkness, broke through the glass, and jumped out the third floor window.

At that very moment, a red sports car burst from a back alley and tried to break though the center of a group of police officers.

I fell right on top of it.

With the sound of denting metal, the low-riding sports car swerved left and right. The harsh impact had activated the airbag. With the driver's view and access to the steering wheel blocked by the airbag, a car could easily become a deadly weapon.

It finally crashed into a nearby telephone pole.

I was thrown from the car, but I quickly hopped to my feet on the road. I approached the driver's side door and used the grip of my handgun to smash the window.

I could see a woman's face through the gap of some long bangs and a large wound seemed to split her mouth open. At first, I thought she had been injured during the accident, but a closer look showed it was an old wound.

I held the muzzle of my gun to the young woman's head and shouted to her.

"Where are the children!?"

"I-I don't know…"

I didn't have time to deal with this, so I waved over a nearby uniformed police officer.

"You! This calculation could get a little tricky, so could you help me out?"

"I-I suppose."

"Each floor has twenty rooms. It's a seven-story building, but we can ignore the first floor. That's six floors of rooms. How many rooms is that?"

"Um, 120."

"And there are twenty identical buildings."

"2400 rooms."

"The maximum detention period for a single crime is 23 days even with extensions. What's that times 2400?"

"Wait just a second… Would it be 55,200 days?"

"And to finish it off, what's that divided by 365 days?"

"That would be about 151 years."

I turned back to the driver's seat where the young woman was dripping with sweat.

"You heard him. Oh, and that's only the lowest theoretical value. Any old people who have already died will count separately. …If you want to say silent, that's your right. I can speak with the prosecutors and have you eternally arrested for different crimes. Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to stay silent in the holding cell. Isn't that great? You'll have food to eat until the day you die paid for by the people's taxes."

“Y-you can’t do that. You won’t get away with that! M-my lawyers won’t let you!”

“But lawyers are only called in once you’re indicted. They can’t do anything at the investigation stage. You’ll be stuck in that closed room. Hopefully you’ll live until the trial begins 150 years from now.”

I casually pulled out some handcuffs and the woman looked on the verge of tears.

“F-fine! Fine!! I’ll talk!!”

“Keep it short.”

Technically, the constitution said excessive detention counted as torture and thus any testimony obtained that way was not permissible in court. But I had no obligation to tell her that.

“I-it’s true I tried to silence those children. I even kidnapped them. But I couldn’t do it. I know it sounds stupid, but I couldn’t stop trembling when it came down to dirtying my own hands.” I breathed a sigh of relief without letting it show on my face.

But she wasn’t done talking.

“So…”

Truth turned out to be stranger than fiction. And in the worst possible way.

“I closed them all in the refrigerator. That way I didn’t have to dirty my own hands.”

…You what!!!???

I handcuffed this obvious criminal, left her with a uniformed police officer, borrowed a police car, and headed to the refrigerator – technically a refrigerated warehouse – the young woman told me about. The lights on the way were out from the blackout, so the traffic lights were dead and there were accidents everywhere. Fear squeezed at my heart, but I still continued onward.

I made my way to a freezing Ubasute Mountain that worked differently from those illegal apartments.

It took a full thirty minutes to arrive and I could not even imagine how much of the trapped children’s lives were being worn away in the meantime.

I saw what seemed to be guards huddled together speaking near the dark refrigerated warehouses, so I approached them.

“Who’s in charge here?”

“Wh-who are you?”

“That doesn’t matter! Who’s in charge!?”

Oops, I just pulled out my gun before my badge.

The guards went pale, raised their hands, and spoke with a tremor in their voices.

“What are you? A tuna thief? We don’t have anything like that here! We only store ice cream!”

“Some abducted children were closed inside. If you don’t want to be charged as accomplices, then help me search!”

“You’re kidding right!? Which warehouse!?”

“I don’t know, so open them all up and check! Hurry!!”

We rushed off and one of the guards complained under his breath.

“What an awful day. And after this weird blackout wiped out all our products.”

“What?”

“The freezers can’t run with the power out, right? What if they complain that we didn’t inspect the equipment properly? I better not lose my winter bonus!”

For better or for worse, the refrigerated warehouses were not running.

Which meant…

“Shit, there really are kids in here!! Hey, over here! Over here!!”

Another guard shouted in the distance, so we all ran over. Cold white air wafted out from the opened door, but it was weaker than it might have been.

The guards only peered in without setting foot inside.

When I stepped in, I found five lumps huddled together in a corner. Their skin was disturbingly pale, their breathing was weak, and they were not moving in the slightest, but…

“They’re alive,” I muttered before raising my voice to a shout. “They’re all alive!! Please bring out blankets, heaters, and a pot of hot water or whatever you have. Hurry!!”

Part 14 (Hachikawa Tomoe)

A largescale blackout kept our cellphones from working, but radios and normal landlines seemed fine. The police working in the apartments told us that the detective had found Takkun and the other children safe, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

I then looked up at the apartments again.

“What’s going to happen to the people living here?”

Wankashi Real Estate was clearly a villain, but if they were arrested, what would happen to the rights to the apartments? Someone else might buy it, but if they decided to tear down the condemned buildings, the old people would have to leave.

But where would they go?

I was nervous, but Enbi cheerfully replied while rubbing the head of her Sunekosuri scarf.

“They’ll manage.”

“Eh? What do you mean? Will the police help them?”

“The police can’t interfere in civil matters, but that’s why freelancers like me exist. Besides, taking down Wankashi doesn’t mean we’ve judged all of the villains behind this.”

She grinned and pulled out her smartphone.

She seemed to be making a list of what she had to do.

“Don’t you dare underestimate me, villains.”

Part 15 (3rd person)

There was a small but respectable house in a quiet neighborhood along the Arakawa River. Originally, an old man had spent half his life working to pay off the loan, but his son and daughter-in-law had stolen it from him. They had taken and hidden the deed and bankbook and violently thrown the man himself out.

“He was supposed to be dead already. What is Wankashi doing?”

A man grumbled as he stomped in circles around the living room. The man had easily thrown out his own father, so he was hardly the type to make friendly relationships on his own. The room was already filled with a savage atmosphere and the house seemed more like a cage. He might live with his family on paper, but they were actually completely scattered.

Then something happened to further rub the irritated man the wrong way.

An intermittent beeping exploded through the window. The sound was used to warn of a truck or heavy machinery backing up. It was late at night and in a neighborhood, so the man grew irritated at this lack of manners (while ignoring his own constant lack of manners). But then something unexpected happened.

With a shock like a car had run into it, something broke through the living room wall.

“Wh-what!?”

He frantically got down on the ground and his anger began to boil up. He rushed outside without putting on his shoes and saw a yellow piece of heavy machinery breaking through the fence. Something like a beak made of thick metal was digging into the material of the wall.

“What in the hell are you doing to my house!?”

“Hmm?”

That carefree response came from the surprisingly young woman operating the equipment. She continued tearing at the wall and the house was already tilting in that direction.

“You say that, but why are you living in an abandoned house? That’s dangerous, you know?”

“Wha-?”

“Um, the official owner is an old man named Tayama Sunao-san, but he apparently hasn’t returned home for over a decade. It was deemed abandoned and administrative subrogation was carried out.”

“…!!”

That may be true!!

Yeah, it’s officially that old man’s house and of course he hasn’t come back after we punched and kicked him to drive him out!!

He just about spoke those thoughts aloud, but he obviously could not say that to a city worker.

“Please wait!! We live here! I’m that old man’s son!!”

“Haven’t heard anything about that. Making claims is easy. Everyone living in an abandoned house insists they’re a relative and we don’t have time to deal with it all. If you could contact Tayama-san himself, that would work, though.”

Like I know his phone number! Besides, that old man was supposed to be dead already! Then that hidden deed would be invalid and ownership would transfer to us! So why!?

The more he thought about it, the more unfair it seemed, but he could not think of a way of objectively convincing someone of that.

“Th-then what happens to us? What do we do starting tomorrow!?”

“Don’t ask me. The land was bought up by the ward and the compensation was paid directly to Tayama Sunao-san without going through his bank account.”

A great roar filled the air.

The man’s tilting home finally crumbled to the ground.

Part 16 (3rd person)

It was an unbelievable story.

First, it turned out they could get a new copy of the deed as long as the real estate company still had the original copy stored. And when the owner had not returned for a long period of time, it could be registered as abandoned and directly sold to the local government.

Second, the apartments they lived in had aged so much and so many had died that the property value had fallen about as low as possible. By gathering together the money all those old people had gotten by selling their homes, they had enough to buy up all of the land.

Third, as soon as the Yamanba isolation Package vanished, the local people's attitudes completely changed. The people at the government office remade the intentionally bad road and the convenience stores and supermarkets were willing to deliver.

And it was all thanks to a twintailed middle school girl in a swimsuit who was their grandchildren's age.

"I only returned everything to its rightful place, so I didn't save you. This is just how everything should have been in the first place."

When the girl had left, she had smiled.

"So if you feel someone saved you, it wasn't me. Someone else fits the bill a lot better."

As an old man *turned the faucet and watered the flower garden with the hose,* he heard some small footsteps approaching.

The previous incident had caused them a lot of trouble, but the children had still come to see the old man.

"Mister, did you know there's a festival during the fall?"

"Yes, it's to give thanks for all the fish. The river is filled with concrete now, but when I was your age, you could fill your stomach as long as you had a fishing pole."

"Will you go with us? Everyone says the shaved ice is the best, but cotton candy is clearly better."

That was no longer a modern day Ubasute Mountain made of concrete.

If even one person held out their hand, they could easily shatter that invisible cage.

Chapter 3: Turn@Hishigami Mai & Illness Magic User

Part 1 (3rd person)

Roppongi, Tokyo.

Perhaps due to the influence of TV, that land itself seemed to have a brand image. Among the many high-rise buildings there, a man used the entire top floor of a fifty-story building as his second home.

His name was Banjou Akira.

He was turning forty-five this year and he was often introduced on TV as a philanthropist. He would donate money on the level of lottery winnings to individuals or groups afflicted with various social problems or that worked to resolve those problems. It could be midsized or small corporations developing caregiving robots, a production company making ads to reduce the number of littered cigarettes, or a housewife giving out food to the homeless.

Every inch of the soundproofed walls of his home theater room was covered in newspaper and magazine clippings and printouts from online articles. They were all praising Banjou. As he smiled gently in the media's eye, he was actually incredibly concerned about how others viewed him.

Also…

One wall reflected a bright white light. A projector displayed the personal information of murderers and kidnappers who had troubled the world in the past few years. Specifically, they were those who had used a Youkai and thus could not be judged by the law or were reduced to a lower crime that could be judged. Deadly muggings were treated as theft and abductions were treated as deceptive obstruction of business.

A few of the photographs had big red Xs over them.

A cause of death was written next to those ones: a traffic accident during transport, beaten to death in their cell, or an attack from a hornet or poisonous spider.

In the end, he had funded those kinds of actions just as much as his official donations.

Banjou Akira only ever thought about social problems.

And both officially and in secret, he would spare no expense to help anyone who was working to resolve those problems. Even if he ended up taking someone's life, he felt not a twinge of guilt.

But his fat body tilted sideways in his leather chair. He fell right to the floor. Banjou Akira would never move again and a woman stared down at his unmoving form.

“It’s over.”

Her name was Hishigami Mai. The beautiful woman wore a tank top and hot pants and she used a large satellite cellphone to call the ten year old girl named Hafuri who led Hyakki Yakou.

The small canine Youkai at her feet, the Sunekosuri, was trembling in fear. His teeth had been chattering and he had not been able to speak a word.

“I just dealt with t Shinshou Hitsubatsu’s sponsor. His bank account will be frozen when news of his death gets out, so even if he’s set up automatic transfers, they won’t be getting any more money. I just hope this stops their work.”

“How did you do it?”

“High-quality brandy and sleeping pills. People really need to read the warnings before they use those things. Everyday life is full of dangers.”

“But that’s his second home, isn’t it? Since it’s a celebrity’s secret home, his family isn’t going to find him. Couldn’t it take over a month before he’s found?”

“That’s why I’m calling emergency services on the home phone once I finish speaking with you. I’ll have the corpse hold the receiver and never say a word on the phone. I can mess with the humidifier’s settings to throw off the estimated time of death, so it doesn’t matter that the order was backwards. His body will be found faster than a coin locker baby.”

With that comment, Mai glanced over at the home theater’s screen.

The man must have enjoyed the limelight because he had filled the screen with the photographs that acted as twisted trophies of his targets. One photo in the center was especially large.

The photo was of a ten year old genius girl named Ranzono Sachi.

She was a criminal who had constructed an Oomukade Package on her own. The Youkai-related crime and her young age had made her difficult to charge in court, so she had been a double punch for the justice-obsessed owner of the room.

And currently, she was the top target of an organization named Shinshou Hitsubatsu.

“We will monitor Shinshou Hitsubatsu’s actions,” said Hafuri.

“Sure, sure. But if this doesn’t stop them, the situation might get a little tricky. If it comes to that, maybe I’ll see if I can get his help.”

“I doubt he would help us now.”

“Don’t be so sure. I bet you could convince him right away if you gave him a teary-eyed puppy dog look.”

Mai sounded like she did not really care.

“That Illness Magic User is super easy to understand. I’m sure he’s still running full speed down the path of the fleeing soldier with that gloomy look on his face!”

Part 2 (Illness Magic User)

“Miss, miss! Give me an udon! A kitsune udon!! I’m starving!”

“Oh, my. Should the Inugami Gyoubu tanuki really be ordering kitsune udon? Won’t Osakabe-Hime laugh at you?”

“G-gulp!! N-no! I’m a human, I swear. Look, no tail or anything!”

“Well, you can order whatever you want as long as the money isn’t actually leaves. Here’s your kitsune udon!”

The supplied soy sauce had lost some of its flavor, so I used a type of Illness Magic to ferment it while listening to those energetic voices.

It seemed like everywhere served udon in Shikoku. That wasn’t isolated to Kagawa. If you walked into any restaurant, you were bound to find udon. I wasn’t that picky about cooking or food, but I felt like I had been eating nothing but chilled zaru udon recently.

Some said the texture or the water used was the real heart of udon, but I hadn’t chosen this restaurant for anything like that. Its simple flavor had no noticeable positives, but any unpleasant points had been thoroughly removed. That fit my tastes pretty well.

My Illness Magic did not rely on Youkai. It was born from the stress I created myself. Those “unpleasant points” could do far more damage to one’s internal organs than people thought.

Take this newspaper article for example:

“The water has been cut off throughout Hakata, Fukuoka. Did a mistake in the water purification plant contaminate the water supply?”

Or this TV news report:

“The fire that began yesterday at an Aomori oil reserve site is showing no signs of being extinguished. The government has sent in a hyper rescue squad to assist the local firefighters.”

Or this gossip:

“Hey, miss, had you heard the Shikoku Bridge has been blocked off since morning? Truck accidents sure are scary. And there’s no way to prevent it when the driver has a sudden stroke. Tremble, tremble.”

It didn’t matter whether it had any connection to me or not. I knew it made me a difficult person, but whenever I heard things like that, it filled me with displeasure and shortened my lifespan.

Basically, I was covered in beads of sweat that looked too small for my two meter frame. Even now, I could see a meaningless scowl on my face in the polished table.

So as I did whatever it took to protect my lifespan, people started treating me like a hero. When I started getting a little carried away, the organization named Hyakki Yakou took me in.

Of course, my connection to Hyakki Yakou had already ended.

I had lost anything to guide my life and yet here I was. I had no idea where to go.

“Hi, Illness Magic-chan!! I haven’t seen you since Kyoto, but how’ve you been?”

My thoughts were cut off by a scantily-clad woman plopping down in the seat across from me. To be honest, I felt like this alone took years off my life, but she didn’t seem to care. She looked around the restaurant instead of checking the menu and she stared at the large man who had apparently copied the restaurant worker’s outfit when transforming.

“Oh, a tanuki’s eating kitsune udon. Miss, give me a kitsune udon too!!”

“N-no, I’m a human!! My tail’s hidden and everything!!”

The restaurant worker ignored the rioting tanuki general and carried a bowl over to our table. She then gave the frivolous woman named Hishigami Mai a curious look.

“Sigh, I never would have guessed this guy knew someone so beautiful. Who is he to you?”

“Eh heh☆ What do you think?”

Hishigami Mai smiled and gave a disturbing wink.

The restaurant worker put her hands on her hips.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter as long as he has some kind of friend. This gloomy-looking outsider kept showing up at the same time to eat this plain zaru udon, so rumors are going around he’s here to commit suicide and is trying to build up his resolve.”

She laughed as she left, but the small canine Sunekosuri was spotted as she did. “Miss, I’m afraid of dogs!” “I am not a dog! I am a Sunekosuri, you tanuki!!” “Help!!” The woman had to go calm down the two arguing Youkai.

Now that we were alone, I asked a quiet question.

“Why are you here?”

“If you feel like fighting, wait until after I’ve eaten. Waiting until after you’ve heard what I have to say would be even better.”

Hishigami used her chopsticks to dig into the kitsune udon. I casually observed that she seemed to be the type that saved the fried tofu until the end and she finally looked up again.

“I have a job for you.”

“A job?”

“Yes. But make no mistake here. This job isn’t from me. Hyakki Yakou’s young lady is asking. Interested now?”

“…”

“Well, I’ll drag you into this even if you aren’t.”

She grabbed the bowl in both hands and splendidly gulped down the broth.

“Ever heard of an organization called Shinshou Hitsubatsu? They’re a bunch of assassins that claim they only kill people because they don’t like how Youkai-related crimes aren’t getting judged properly. A few high-level Hyakki Yakou members were taken out by them, so they’re being hunted down for revenge.”

“Then why not get started? Even without me, you still have four of the Top Five. What about the Venom or the Heirloom?”

“Unfortunately, we can’t do it that way. To be blunt, their fighting force is too unique. A straightforward attack isn’t going to cut in. It’s to the point that we want the opinion of someone with a similar job.”

…Don’t tell me.

At my silent urging, Hishigami smiled and continued with a slice of green onion (it had to be intentionally) still stuck to her cheek.

“That’s right. The enemy this time is a Byouki user… They’re an expert in disease and curses, just like you.”

Silence fell.

A Byouki was a variation of the kodoku created by having poisonous insects kill each other in a jar. That cat Youkai had its origins on the continent and it would possess its target on the command of the user. From there, it would spread the disease and transform the infected into killers.

We were both glaring at each other, but our expressions were polar opposites. The Hishigami woman had a delighted smile on her face. Or was that just how she looked when ready to fight?

“Now, what will you do? Of course, if it comes to a direct fight between Hyakki Yakou and Shinshou Hitsubatsu, Hyakki Yakou can win by force. But the losses would be pretty high. It would be like a group of scissors trying to defeat a rock in a rock-paper-scissors battle. And if Hyakki Yakou’s power is worn down, other hostile organizations might jump at the chance. …And most importantly, the young lady would look pretty sad if more people died.”

“…”

“Besides, you’re just wandering around without anything to do, right? Did you come to Shikoku for a pilgrimage? Or for a cucumber sealing? Either way, an individual’s power isn’t enough to manage a curse on the level of a grudge that can destroy Kyoto. I think you should let go of your sour grapes, bow down to Hyakki Yakou, and borrow some of their incense.”

Hishigami sounded entirely carefree.

“Also, if a curse of your level was forced onto them, every shrine and temple in the country would be in trouble. I won’t get mad, so tell me the truth. You were the one that nearly destroyed the Togenuki-Jizou at Sugamo, weren’t you? When the young lady went out to inspect it, she bowed down to the chief priest. He was shocked, let me tell you.”

…*Nhh.*

“Honestly, shaming your master like that would normally be worthy of seppuku, you know? So pay back your debt, umbrella-making ronin! Heh heh heh. You’re not some virgin girl, so you can pay it back with your body!!”

Nhhhh!?

“Almost there, huh? Then I’ll just leave some completely unrelated documents right here!”

Hishigami placed a few A4-sized pieces of copy paper on the table. They seemed to be the results of an investigation into someone, but I didn’t recognize the child in the photograph.

“What is this?”

“Shinshou Hitsubatsu’s primary target at the moment. She’s Ranzono Sachi-chan, ten years old. …And she’s a criminal involving a Package. Left alone, the Byouki’s disease will attack her first. A group of adults – and professionals at that – will torment her to death.”

“So what? She has nothing to do with me.”

“Don’t even try, samurai. I can tell from here you’re itching to do something. You have approximately three days, but that’s the most you’ll get. If you ignore this, a professional will kill a ten year old girl. Although it’s true she has nothing to do with you.”

She grinned and continued speaking, knowing perfectly well what would reach me the best.

Yes, she had said she would drag me into this.

“I did some research into Ranzono Sachi. She’s a pitiful genius girl who put together a Package on her own and fought back against the entire world to protect the homes of an Oomukade and Tsuchigumo. Oh, but for better or for worse, she apparently hasn’t killed anyone yet. She was stopped before she could.”

“…”

“And the whole deal with the Oomukade and Tsuchigumo’s home smells fishy to me. Sachi-chan was raised in Tokyo, but a Yamanba Package driving old people to a lonely death was active at the time. It’s possible someone messed with that Package to give themselves some secondary income. They just had to turn the hatred toward Youkai.”

“In other words, this Ranzono Sachi would never have strayed from the proper path if not for someone from our industry?”

“Most likely. She was dragged into our industry and now she’ll be killed by it. … Those are the circumstances Sachi-chan found herself in. So what’ll you do, Mr. Samurai? Wouldn’t it be fun to save the village girl who was manipulated by a misguided revenge story and will now be executed for the crime?”

This *was* my business. She *did* have something to do with me. We *had* dragged her into this.

I silently clenched my teeth while looking at the papers on the table.

“Incidentally, Sachi-chan is being taken from the Intellectual Village named Noukotsu Village and through the neighboring Bozen City on the way to be prosecuted. She’ll probably be attacked on the way. If we knew the exact route being used, it would be easy to kill or protect her, but the world never makes it that easy.”

In other words, she was hoping Bozen City would become a battlefield between my Illness Magic and the Byouki as I hunted down the main fighting force of Shinshou Hitsubatsu.

“Fine.”

A slight sticky sound could be heard.

As soon as a black stain appeared on the papers, they disintegrated and vanished from this world.

“As soon as I confirm this request really is from Hyakki Yakou, I will begin. But if you are lying, I will dispose of you. Got that?”

“Sure. I’ll act as your backup. I’m looking forward to working with you, Illness Magic-chan. Let’s do our best to save Hyakki Yakou and Sachi-chan☆”

Part 3 (Illness Magic User)

The rural Bozen City had developed from a mountain truck depot that supported Noukotsu Village’s mail-order network. It had a population of about one hundred thousand. I arrived by train, shoved some balled-up banknotes in the white feather donation box in front of the station, and received a call on my modified cellphone.

“Welcome to Bozen City, Illness Magic-chan.”

…Is she watching me from somewhere?

I glanced around, but didn’t see anyone like her in the crowd.

“I want to share the bare minimum of information needed to provide backup, so could you at least tell me where you’re going to attack?”

“For Illness Magic, a Byouki, or any other disease-related paranormal power, the targeting is what matters most.

As I slipped a memo containing *an extremely simple chemical formula* into the hand of a young supporter who had apparently hit a road block in developing an ALS treatment, I walked through the crowd and continued the conversation.

“If they can acquire the location of Ranzono Sachi, they just have to let their disease spread endlessly from a remote location. That means the Byouki user or one of their pawns must be building a personal search system. They’ll be rushing around gathering material for that, so I can capture them if I cut them off. If it’s the user themselves, I’m done. If it’s a subordinate, I just have to get them to talk.”

“In other words, *you have to see your target* to attack?”

“Of course.”

“Hm? But Illness Magic, wasn’t it said you could fill half of Europe with disease if you wanted to? That seems well beyond what you can see with the naked eye.”

“I had satellite support when I worked for Hyakki Yakou. I had about four hundred of those thirty-centimeter civilian satellites they make in shopping districts anywhere.”

“Ugeh!? You make that sound simple, but that’s even more than America’s GPS network! If I could’ve used that, I would have noticed what was going on at Goldmine Island a hell of a lot faster!!”

“That’s nothing compared to what I could do if I worked with the Venom Clairvoyant of the Top Five. But without any of that support, my abilities are limited.”

I had gotten off topic.

“Anyway, I will pursue Shinshou Hitsubatsu’s extremities and use them to find the head. That’s standard operating procedure.”

“Sure thing. …But I have on piece of advice for you. Be careful how you handle any prisoners you take. Get careless and they’ll melt away.”

“?”

“I mean that literally. The Byouki person has put something inside their subordinates. I’ve tried threats, negotiation, bribes, and brainwashing, but their body always melts away as soon as they choose betrayal. That’s the real problem that’s kept me from getting any information.”

“I see.”

There were countless types of mold and germs that would grow in the human body. The Trichophyton fungus that causes athlete’s foot is a good example. If they were given an extreme boost with paranormal power, they could become a biological weapon that dissolved the human body to the bone.

“Does that mean you have a list of people you want to interrogate, but can’t do anything with it? Then hand it over. I’ll seal the disease and get them to talk.”

“That’s why I called. I’ll start by giving you the biggest name on the list, as far as I know. They probably have some important information, so I was afraid of making them melt.”

“Who is it?”

“A well-known person. Ever heard of the Arson Thief?”

Part 4 (3rd person)

The young woman may or may not have reached twenty yet. She had straight blonde hair long enough to reach her waist, thin-lensed glasses that gave her an intellectual appearance, a tight-skirted dress colored rouge red, and stockings with a black garter belt. The outfit resembled a suit, yet she looked nothing like a productive member of society. Even a flashy announcer would hesitate before standing in front of the camera in that.

She was the Arson Thief.

She was sitting in a window-side seat on the second floor of an Italian restaurant while speaking with someone on her cellphone.

“Yes, yes. It’s all going according to plan. Ah ha ha. It’s already on the news? Don’t worry. All the evidence will end up as ashes or charcoal. The police and firefighters won’t be able to tell what was stolen there.”

Simply put, she provided supplies for the organization named Shinshou Hitsubatsu.

She would gather anything needed for a job. And she would do so safely. She was very careful to make sure she never handed over something that could be traced and land her comrades in trouble.

“If you want to lose pursuit, going over the top is actually better. A half-assed attempt at hiding the evidence will only leave more for them to find. Even if this ends up like one of the great fires of Edo, they can’t track us down if they can’t find anything.”

She was that kind of thief.

She would break in, kill, steal, start a fire, and escape. She specialized in one of the greatest criminal occupations that had been especially hated and despised for three hundred years.

“Once we have what I’m here for, we can search for Ranzono Sachi’s location. Even if she’s a minor, we can’t allow an acquittal when a Youkai was involved. Afterwards, you take care of the rest with your disease, Byouki. Just like always.”

The Arson Thief showed no sign of noticing the contradiction of committing a crime to punish a crime or using a Youkai to defeat a target who had protected Youkai.

In the end, that was the sort of organization Shinshou Hitsubatsu was.

After hanging up, she put her cellphone in her handbag. In its place, she pulled out a device larger than an SLR camera and placed it on the table. It was an electric circular saw that looked horribly out of place with her suit that was colored the red of a sports car. The saw’s exterior was pink, so it was oddly humorous.

“Hm? Oh, some of the teeth have come off. Is it about time for some new ones?”

She traced her glove-covered fingertips across the edge and slowly stood from her seat. After looking around the empty restaurant, her eyes stopped on one corner in particular.

There, a pitiful family of three lay on the floor with their arms, legs, and mouth tied or covered with duct tape.

Again and again, the second year middle school girl named Sakashita Sou blankly asked herself how this could have happened.

Her father was a chef. He had moved to Italy to train and had returned to Japan after finally earning that title. She had often been lonely when her whole family could not come to her sports festivals and parents' days at school, but she had still rooted for her father's dream. When he had celebrated like a child after finding a way to raise the money he needed to start his own restaurant, she had smiled and known she had made the right decision. Today, she and her mother had come before opening day to inspect the restaurant and be served as the very first guests.

So how had this happened?

"Sorry about this, but my paranormal powers lose their luster without some periodic maintenance to my tools. So I like to have some parts in reserve just in case. And this gives me an impromptu hideout, so that's two birds with one stone."

The woman in a red dress lifted her brutal circular saw. The pink weapon almost seemed comical. Even with their arms and legs bound, Sakashita Sou's parents lay on top of her to protect her. For a moment, she thought she was going to be chopped to pieces by the power tool like a scene from a gruesome horror movie, but she was wrong. A closer look revealed the truth.

Specifically, a closer look at the *circular saw's teeth.*

The round metal edge was covered in *actual human teeth.*

"W-wah!? Mghah!! Mghoh!!!???"

Five or ten teeth were not going to cut it. There were at least ten times that many. How many people had been sacrificed to create and maintain a tool like that? And that maintenance was held periodically and constantly. Sakashita Sou felt like her view of the world was being fried.

The beautiful woman placed a metal set of pliers on the table and smiled.

"Don't worry. I'll keep you alive until I've pulled them all out. It's like blood donations. The materials have an expiration date. I'll just take one at a time and, once I've taken them all, I won't need you anymore."

"…!?"

"Oh, don't worry about this place. *No matter how much evidence is splattered around,* I can just burn it all away at the end. You can't take the police's forensic investigations lightly, but if you get all the important bits and *manage the furnace properly*, the heat will wipe everything clean."

They would be used like a flowerbed to grow teeth, their teeth would be pulled one at a time as parts for this woman's tool, and once their teeth were gone, they would be chopped into little pieces and disposed of.

And the restaurant her father had dreamed of since he was a child and that had received his family's support would be burned down to complete this woman's system.

(Why…?)

Sakashita Sou understood all that, but she could no longer feel anger.

The overwhelming sense of unfairness and fear drowned out all else. Even if she was ashamed at herself for yielding, she could not stop the very core of her body from trembling in the face of this madwoman.

(Why is this happening!?)

Her repetition of that unanswerable question was proof that she had stopped thinking. She and her family's situation was simply that hopeless. They had no way of breaking free and no help was coming. But she could not bear to accept that simple fact, so her thoughts entered a meaningless infinite loop.

But then, she heard a loud noise.

The door to the stairs was forced open and a young man flew in like a bullet.

The Arson Thief narrowed her eyes slightly.

The man was one of the guards she had placed around the restaurant. He bounced along the floor a few times like a ball, plowed through the chairs and tables in the way, slid past the woman in the red dress, and finally stopped after crashing into the window.

Had he been punched or kicked?

Next, a large, gloomy man stepped in and glared at the Arson Thief.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“At the very least, I’m not the same as you.”

That was all he said.

As soon as the man grabbed a charm between two fingers, something like a pitch black mist erupted from his entire body. It swirled around, but before it could take concrete form and attack, the Arson Thief used her thumb to flick the switch for her human tooth circular saw.

A tremendous roar burst out. She slammed the blade against a nearby table and orange sparks cascaded out.

A moment later, the sparks absorbed something and flames swelled explosively outwards. No, this was not a mere fire. It may have been a deluge of red-hot melted metal. The mysterious hellfire devoured the oxygen in the air as it surged toward the large man and swallowed him whole.

“Are you a disease-type like the Byouki?”

The Arson Thief mocked the newly-made human torch. She then attached a heart-shaped carabiner to the grip of her pink circular saw and attached a synthetic fiber leash to that. She swung it around. The ferocious morning star whooshed around as it tore into the floor, walls, ceiling, and furniture. Each time it hit something, sparks would burst out, producing further scorching hellfire from a variety of angles. The orange flood rushed in from every direction.

“But diseases are traditionally weak to boiling and fire. Before the advent of bacteriology, mankind learned from their experiences and wove that into their legends. It’s too bad, whoever you are.”

“Since you use human teeth, do you use a Kitsunebi?”

A calm voice cut her off.

It was far from the voice of a man being burned alive in a furnace.

“A fox is said to strike human bones together to create a bewitching flame. …If so, that is an overly-decorated and inefficient system. I can probably recreate this with a phosphorescent chemical substance.”

A tremendous roar burst out.

The black tornado tore through and dispersed the orange flames from within.

“Wha-!?”

“There are countless heat-resistant bacteria. Like the ones that grow in a volcano’s caldera and consume sulfur. I can easily survive this by using my Illness Magic to create an umbrella based on them.”

The Arson Thief realized her thoughts had ground to a halt.

She came dangerously close to touching her own circular saw as she swung around the electric morning star to reject it all. She would create a massive enough conflagration to burn away any and all inconveniences.

But…

“It may be reinforced by the paranormal, but it’s still a flame.”

The carpet of flames filling the restaurant completely vanished as if it had all been a joke.

The large man’s expression had not changed one iota.

“By creating aerobic bacteria – that is, bacteria that consume oxygen – I can easily erase those flames. Water is useless with the flames from chemical incendiary rounds, but sand works just fine. All flames grow fragile if you rob them of their oxygen.”

“…”

The Arson Thief could not move a single step. She had stopped swinging around the saw. The power tool clunked to the ground, moved about madly like a poorly trained dog, and only scattered sparks as insignificant as pissing on a telephone pole.

“How about we talk this out?”

That was all the large man said as he started casually across the floor.

He carried the entire scene’s atmosphere with him.

“What did the Byouki user ask for and where are you taking it? If you won’t talk, I’ll imitate Alzheimer’s or Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and ask your brain directly.”

“Ha…ha ha.”

While trembling, the beauty in a red dress laughed tensely with nowhere left to run. And as she did, a certain thought filled her head: I’ve won.

She could control all types of flames and use their various traits: burning, consuming oxygen, gathering people’s attention, jumping from object to object, bursting out like a trap when a door was opened, etc.

And that included the hypnotizing flames that led people to hallucinate.

There were several kinds of hypnotism, but one way to induce a hypnotic state was to have the target stare at a flickering flame. Some theories said that was why the Hyakumonogatari used candles or lanterns. The Arson Thief would secretly weave those flames into the battle to slowly invade the brain of her opponent.

(It doesn’t matter if my flames don’t work on you.)

The unfocused eyes and unthinkably relaxed facial muscles were both signs that her target was not in a normal state of mind.

She pulled on the leash to retrieve the raging circular saw and grabbed it in both hands.

(You can believe you've won and stand there meaninglessly while your organs splatter to the floor!!)

A moment later, a strange noise exploded in her hands. The fiercely rotating blade had come apart on its own. The blade, the motor, the cover, and every last screw fell separately to the floor. The rapid rotation continued, so the blade nearly severed her foot on its way down.

"……
……Eh?"

This time, the Arson Thief's thoughts truly did come to a stop.

"There are molds that corrode metal. This one gathered some attention when it damaged a passenger plane."

The man responded with a composed expression, but that was not the real problem here.

(Why!? How!? He should be under my hypnotic control!!)

The enemy walked straight toward her with long strides. He could clearly see her properly. The beautiful woman could only shake her head at the overwhelming unfairness of it all, but she finally caught on a moment later.

(He isn't thinking for himself.)

A chill ran down her spine.

(Did he detect the oddity and infect his own brain and spinal column with his Illness Magic? Did he send a virus into his own body to escape my hypnotism and continue fighting semi-automatically!?)

She had the right answer, but that did not reveal a way out of her predicament.

Before the Arson Thief could do anything, the large man grabbed her collar, lifted her with one arm, and slammed her back into the floor.

The sound produced by their height difference was much greater than that of a judo throw.

Part 5 (Illness Magic User)

I had defeated my target. I still needed to release the tied-up civilians, but I prioritized the Arson Thief. Whenever a member of Shinshou Hitsubatsu spilled the beans, they would be infected and killed by an acute form of athlete's foot.

I grabbed the unconscious woman and dragged her to the kitchen.

I opened the industrial refrigerator, checked through the contents, and poked at the side of the woman's head with the tip of my military boots.

"Wake up."

"Eh? Ah…Cough, cough, cough!?"

When she woke in confusion, she choked for a bit and widened her eyes.

I crouched down and held a common food item in front of her face.

“If you tell me about the Byouki user, I’ll remove the ‘collar’ wrapped around your throat.”

“Y-you’re kidding, right?”

“This is called a cucumber sealing. It’s a Shikoku ritual to pray for health and safety. As the name suggests, you seal your illness inside a cucumber and bury it in the earth. It’s up to you whether you want to try it or not, but if you refuse, your options are dying from athlete’s foot across your body or being forced into a life slavery. What’ll it be?”

“…”

“This is your one and only chance. Don’t you want to live in freedom?”

I could hear her clench her teeth even at my distance.

She may have called them her comrades or her organization, but it looked like she had known the truth.

“If you can really do it, prove it ahead of time. Prove you can satisfy me with that cucumber.”

“A simple task, but don’t forget that all it does is ‘seal’ the illness. Until it’s buried, I can still return the acute athlete’s foot to you at any time.”

The ritual itself was not difficult. After reciting a ceremonial curse, the illness hidden in her body was transferred to the vegetable.

Once it was over, she looked down at her chest suspiciously.

“Did that really do it?”

Instead of answering, I tossed the infected cucumber toward the kitchen window. The impact broke it in two and the transparent glass was instantly covered in white hypha-like threads. It was like a bomb made of slime mold.

Afraid of the sound and vibration, a centipede on the wall near the window crawled into a gap in the sink.

The woman was dumbfounded, but I got down to business.

“Speak.”

“R-right, of course. I don’t have any obligations to them anymore. …I was acquiring the data needed to build a personal search system for the target, Ranzono Sachi.”

“Specifically?”

“Do you really think you have time for that?”

The woman smiled thinly from the floor and pointed at the ceiling.

No…

“I already handed the USB memory to a Shinshou Hitsubatsu courier. If you don’t hurry up, they’ll get away.”

That was when a deafening roar cut by overhead.

Was it a helicopter? But I hadn’t seen one when checking around the building before my attack.

Regardless, it was true I had no time.

I used my Illness Magic to exterminate the acute athlete’s foot on the kitchen window, opened the window, and stuck my head out. I still couldn’t see anything, but the source of the noise was quite nearby and the wind was rising oddly on the road out front. It was apparently about to ascend, so I still had a chance. As usual, I only had to use my Illness Magic, so I pulled out a charm.

After dealing with what needed to be done, I looked back and saw the woman asking me a question with a servile smile on her face.

“I won’t stop you. I’m free to go, right?”

“By the way, how many people have you killed as the Arson Thief?”

“I don’t know. One or two hundred maybe?”

That wasn’t much. I was hardly one to accuse her of anything, but I had to settle this. I pulled out a new charm.

“Then you can start by sleeping for about two hundred months.”

“Wha-!? That’s not what you-…”

I silenced her with my Illness Magic and left the kitchen. I approached the family of three bound with duct tape and freed only their mouths.

“Wh-what is… Who are you?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t answer that.”

I cut across the room and borrowed a brand new tablecloth. I infected it with Illness Magic and small mushrooms began growing from it.

“These are a type of spiritual mushroom. You can sell them for more than caterpillar fungus. If you head out to Mount Tomi or Yokohama and sell them at a random Chinese medicine shop, you’ll get enough to renew your restaurant with money to spare. Sorry you got caught in the middle of all this.”

They looked dumbfounded, but I left them and called the police on the restaurant phone.

“Yes, this is the police. Please calm down and explain your situation. Are you reporting a crime or an accide-…”

“A robber broke into a new restaurant in Eastern Block 3 of Bozen City. Send the police out immediately.”

With that said, I threw the receiver on the floor without hanging up. Whether they believed me or not, they would trace the source of the call and send someone. The family could tell them what happened then. Paranormal powers or not, even an amateur could tell who was the perpetrator and who was the victim.

In my business, personally providing the police with eyewitness testimony was not the best idea. That Hishigami woman might have silenced the family, but I had no reason to kill them.

With that in mind, I left the restaurant.

I already had a new target. I had to pursue that invisible helicopter.

Part 6 (3rd person)

A Tengu’s mysterious disappearances were the weapon used by Seidou Tagane, the Shinshou Hitsubatsu courier. The young man wore a flashy suit and sunglasses and had his hair bleached pure white, but more importantly, *he could hide himself so long as he was flying.* He could of course hide himself, but the effect also included anything he was controlling, be it a helicopter, an air cushion ship, a passenger plane, or an asteroid. The Tengu was a flying Youkai that made people disappear. He used that trait to carry his payload along the shortest route through the open sky. Nothing could be safer or more reliable.

He let a pilot working for him take care of the helicopter while he crossed his legs in the back seat and shouted into his cellphone to be heard over the loud rotors. “Yeah! I’ll be there right on time. Also, it seems there’s someone after us! Try contacting that Kitsunebi woman. If you can’t reach her or she’s acting weird, use the athlete’s foot!! See ya!”

He hung up and saw the pilot shaking his head. He asked what was going on and realized the pilot was trying to check on the reinforced glass in front

“Um, is this dust or something? It’s clouding my vision…”

“What?”

Seidou Tagane leaned forward to check for himself. There really was a fine powder covering the entire surface of the glass and it did look like sand, but it was not.

(What is this? Mold?)

A moment later, he heard the sound of sparks and his curse stealth using a Tengu’s mysterious disappearances was peeled away. The title of “invisible helicopter” no longer applied and the craft was entirely visible in the blue sky.

“Wh-what!? What just happened!?”

Part 7 (Illness Magic User)

Muscular reinforcement, increased flexibility of the blood vessels and cartilage, protection of the internal organs, readjustment of the energy consumption rate,

activation of the mitochondria, and a change of blood distribution to prevent a blackout.

After taking all the necessary measures with my Illness Magic, I tossed aside several used charms, and ran from the sidewalk to the road.

My body immediately started running at 100 kph. And from there, my speed increased with quadratic growth. I quickly reached the 400 kph line. That was the same speed as a drag racer or a helicopter.

I had already captured my target.

I had scattered several types of mold from the restaurant's second floor window when the helicopter had been preparing to take off. It seemed to be a type of curse stealth using a Tengu's mysterious disappearances, but that simplified matters. Legend had it Tengu did not abduct people who had eaten mackerel because they hated the smell of mackerels.

Since the curse stealth relied on a Tengu, I could remove it by chemically synthesizing the smell.

I had stripped them bare.

They could ignore the roads and terrain to take the shortest path to their destination. I was unfortunately bound by those things, but I could not allow them to escape. I had to secure a route to the Byouki user no matter what.

I overtook the cars on the road, I jumped over the people on the crosswalks, and I would occasionally run along a building's wall to take a sharp turn without losing much speed. I heard screams and confused voices around me, but each time, I used my Illness Magic to erase a few seconds of their short-term memory. I spared the small children because it would have been dangerous for them, but the adults would assume the child had been daydreaming.

Then the helicopter crossed a river.

At more than fifty meters wide, it was too far to jump and there was no bridge nearby.

"Compose an Illness Magic based on blastocladia."

I pulled out a charm, muttered to myself, and leaped toward the river. No matter how much momentum I had built up, I was going to fall into the river partway. But as soon as my feet touched the surface, something like a pure-white lotus leaf spread out. I created my own footing based on a germ that attached to fruit that fell in the water.

I jumped across the surface like a stone skipping on the water and arrived on the opposite bank.

However, this would never end if I continued running along the surface.

To finish this, I needed a long thoroughfare or highway.

Part 8 (3rd person)

Finally, Seidou Tagane realized what was going on.

He saw a form running along the surface at unbelievable speed. Whatever it was, it was following the courier helicopter now that the curse stealth was broken. The helicopter was moving at over 350 kph and could ignore the terrain and roads, but this opponent showed no sign of caring.

The pilot gave a shrill shout.

“Let’s shake them!! We don’t need to stay on this course!!”

“You dumbass, we’ve lost our stealth! Everyone can see us now!”

“And isn’t that why we’re being chased!? I don’t know who that is, but they’re some kind of monster!!”

“Yeah, and the airport control tower radar can see us too! Adding in a false flight plan via the internet’s the most I can manage. Start flying all over the place and they’ll scramble some domestic stealth fighters to come after us!!”

The sky was not as free as it seemed.

It was more crowded than the roads on the surface. Countless beacon signals divided up the flight paths and anything that left those would be deemed dangerous and ordered to land. If it did not respond, they were free to shoot it down.

That meant Seidou Tagane and the pilot could no longer escape.

They knew someone was after them, but they could not swing the control column around like in a movie.

“Dammit, what in the world-…”

Seidou Tagane trailed off.

He had briefly looked away from the ground to argue with the pilot. It had only been for a few seconds, but he had lost sight of the pursuer racing along the surface.

“Find them! Dammit, where’d they go!? Find them!!”

The courier man shouted nervously, but then he spotted something odd.

Some kind of white structure covered the entire straight thoroughfare. It was over a kilometer long and looked like the first rise of a roller coaster or the electromagnetic acceleration catapult from a mass driver in an SF novel. Suddenly, he tensed up.

A catapult?

A moment later, the large man running at 400 kph flew through the air and collided with the side of the helicopter.

He had already exceeded a passenger plane’s takeoff speed. By shifting his vector upwards using sturdy rails made from hyphae, he managed to leap five or six hundred meters into the air.

The reinforced glass and steel door meant nothing.

Something must have corroded them because they were torn away like clay.

The man climbed inside.

“E-eeeeek!?”

Driven by fear, the pilot pulled out his handgun, but that was an obvious mistake.

He had confirmed he was hostile and had nothing to negotiate with. More importantly, they both worked in the underworld. The large man grabbed this “enemy” with a single hand and threw the pilot out of the helicopter.

Seidou Tagane was soaked with sweat and had the look of a man who had boarded an elevator late at night only for a man with a blade to walk in at an intermediary floor.

“Wh-who are you? Who are you!?”

“Tell me what you know about the Byouki user who is after Ranzono Sachi.”

“Do you really think I’ll tell you? I’ll be killed!”

“Then I will kill you now.”

The man pulled out a charm.

With a sticky sound, the helicopter’s silhouette crumbled. As he felt like he had stepped in humus, Seidou Tagane found himself already released into empty air.

“Eh?”

He did not know what had happened.

“Eh?”

The aircraft carrying him had corroded and vanished in only a few seconds.

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!?”

The sensation of falling squeezed at his stomach and he flailed his limbs in vain. Meanwhile, the large man’s expression remained unchanged as he turned around, grabbed Seidou Tagane’s collar, and spoke from close by.

“The Byouki user.”

“I don’t know, dammit! I don’t know!!”

“You will hit the ground in another ten seconds. Is that your final answer?”

“I’m sorryyyyy!! I’ll tell you anythinnnggg!!”

The large man gave an irritated sigh at Seidou Tagane’s tear- and snot-covered face. He pulled out a charm and something like a pure-white umbrella opened from his back. He did not seem to be wearing a parachute and the material was odd. It was a strange parachute made from a slime mold or something.

The large man slowly and carefully landed on the bank of a river and threw Seidou Tagane into a thicket.

Then he made a unilateral demand.

“Tell me everything you know.”

Part 9 (Illness Magic User)

Driving out evil was a common desire, so there were countless rituals for it from all over the world. Like the previous cucumber sealing, items on hand were often enough to perform one of them. This time, I used the river and paper. The specific method was similar to a spirit boat procession. The spirit boat procession was meant to send off the dead, but with a few modifications, I could make a boat with some paper, placed the evil or illness onboard, and send it away.

It may have looked simple, but it was a lot like surgery. It required accurate knowledge and exacting precision down to the millimeter or smaller.

Once I was done, I glared at the man who was breathing heavily in the riverside thicket. A centipede moved out of the way in the grass so I wouldn’t crush it underfoot.

“The Byouki user wanted a search system. Ranzono Sachi is our target, but they didn’t know her exact route. They wanted a system to know her location to make sure she ends up dead no matter what route she takes. The Byouki may seem like cheating, but it isn’t all powerful and it has to follow a certain sequence.”

“That being?”

“A radio interception system. But by adding in a special program, they can pick up the electromagnetic waves sent out by the vehicle’s robot brakes. I’m sure you’ve seen the ads about a car detecting obstacles and stopping on its own even if you let go of the steering wheel.”

The courier man wiped sweat from his brow while sitting on the ground.

“They claim you can’t identify an individual vehicle based on the radar waves, but that isn’t actually true. After all, cars drive along in rows and they’re also exposed to the radar waves of the traffic in the opposite lane. If they reacted to another car’s radar waves and slammed on the brakes, it could easily cause unexpected accidents, so the robot brakes actually have some secret data embedded in them. There’s a registration number just like the license plate number.”

“You mean the Byouki user wants to pick up the robot brake signal of the prisoner transport vehicle carrying Ranzono Sachi?”

“No matter what route she takes, the Byouki can kill her. Recently, there was some ridiculous news about a civilian app that could capture the signal of government planes and reveal their flight paths, remember? This is pretty much the same. Robot brakes are pretty common these days, so you can figure out where the armored cars carrying money for banks and the black luxury cars carrying VIPs are.”

“The Kitsunebi woman said she gave you a USB memory stick.”

“Sorry.” The courier raised both hands while still sitting down. “As soon as I saw you, I threw it out into the sky. It’s sending out a beacon signal, so the Byouki’s probably picking it up right about now.”

“…”

That meant I didn’t have a moment to spare.

Would I pursue and attack the Byouki user or would I search out and protect the prisoner transport vehicle carrying Ranzono Sachi? I had to make up my mind, but I had no hint to ensure success for either option.

But then the courier made a suggestion.

“If you’re willing to listen, I’d like to help you out. So could you maybe spare me?”

“Out with it.”

“I’m a courier, but I’m good at making some money on the side. I made a copy of the USB memory without telling the Byouki. I can’t tell you where they are, but you can use that data to pick up the robot brake signal to find Ranzono Sachi. You want to lie in wait for the Byouki, don’t you? So what’ll you do?”

“Fine. But only if you swear to immediately retire from this industry and never again use your power or skills to cause trouble for civilians.”

“Of course, of course. If I’d known there were people like you out there, I never would have gotten into this business in the first place. I think I’ll head back to the countryside and start farming or something. So I don’t have any use for this data anyways.”

“I see. Then let me give you some more incentive.”

“?”

I pulled out a charm.

A sticky sound burst from within the courier’s head.

“Wh-…bah!? What did…you do!?”

“I attached some Illness Magic to your hippocampus which is deeply related to your memories. If you break your promise, you will harm your own brain. You might be able to fool others, but you can never fool yourself. Bear that in mind.”

“Dammit. You’ve gotta be kidding me! Goddamit!”

After taking the storage medium from the wailing man, I left the area and made a call on my modified cellphone.

“Hello,” said the Hishigami woman.

“Do your duty.”

“Couldn’t you at least ask me to help you? You’re going to break my heart if you keep being such a high level tsundere.”

I ignored her nonsense and mentally went over my plans.

Ranzono Sachi came first. If I could protect her by defeating the Byouki sent after her, the Byouki user would give up on a long-range attack. And if they tried to force their way in for a direct attack, intercepting them and disposing of them would probably be fastest.

Part 10 (Illness Magic User)

“Okay, found that robot brake signal. Looks like they’re abusing the cellphone tower antennae. They’ve added a command to pick up some extra signals around town and send them to a secret server. That lets me search for any car in Bozen City, not just Sachi-chan’s prisoner transport vehicle. Wow! Why is the mayor’s first secretary’s car stopped on the side of the road right now? Is he enjoying some adulterous car sex? He probably doesn’t have anything better to do while the big boss is meeting with the city council.”

“Get to the point.”

“Including decoys, there are three prisoner transport vehicles. The real one is traveling along the mountain pass.”

“The search system only tells you the type of vehicle and their location, not what’s inside.”

“I’m using a different method to pick up camera footage from near the police station. The morons let the target onboard in full view of those cameras. That’s why you need to build your parking lot underground.”

Now that I had that information, I had no more need for her. I hung up and started for the destination. There was no law forbidding a human from travelling at 400 kph on foot, so I pushed myself pretty hard.

I found a small road losing out to the dense trees and a guardrail that had turned green more to corrosion than just rust. This was one of the poorly maintained national roads I would sometimes hear about. It would have been difficult for two light vehicles to pass each other here.

And along one hairpin curve, the guardrail was badly broken.

I peered down and saw a prisoner transport vehicle on the rocky area several meters below.

Had the Byouki arrived ahead of me?

I jumped down to the rocky area and approached the vehicle that had not just fallen on its side but was stuck between two large rocks. First, I used my Illness Magic to corrode the reinforced windshield that had turned pure white from all the cracks. After dragging the driver out, I circled to the back and destroyed the steel door as well. Including the driver, there were three police officers inside. Their uniforms were all soaked red with blood.

But that was all. There was no sign of Ranzono Sachi who should have been restrained inside.

“…Uuh…”

They were just barely breathing. I wanted to ask about Ranzono Sachi, but I couldn’t treat them roughly with their injuries. As I removed all germs from the wounds and used their neckties to stop the blood, a thought came to me.

What kind of injuries were these?

I had initially thought the fall from the road had done it, but I was wrong. Their necks and chests had been torn into in one centimeter wide bands. A blunt injury would not cause that. They had been ripped and torn almost to the throat.

“Watch…”

A groaning young police officer tried to tell me something while looking me in the eye.

I brought my face close to hear his fading voice.

“Watch…out. Behind you!!”

I immediately turned around, but it was too late.

Ranzono Sachi charged toward me like a carnivorous beast and leaped toward my windpipe.

Fresh blood sprayed out.

I had immediately sacrificed my right arm. I heard an unusual tearing sound while I used a charm and Illness Magic to shut down the pain. I swung my arm and her small form flew like a ball, but she skillfully flipped around in midair, regained her balance, and carefully landed on the unstable mountain rocks.

I heard a growl that shook the blood gathered deep in her throat.

She had to have originally been a simple young girl.

She looked quite different from the picture in the documents I had seen, but even children wore makeup these days. If I peeled it all away, I would probably find the face I had seen.

But…

Even that had been blotted out by an animalistic expression.

The girl lowered her hips and let her arms dangle down like a predator crawling on all fours.

Had Ranzono Sachi done this?

It did make sense. The police officers’ injuries had looked like they were torn with human fingernails.

Then had the vehicle crashed because she had gone on a rampage inside? I could see she had broken her handcuffs, despite her slender frame. The bizarre silver bracelets shined dully on her wrists.

That was when the answer hit me.

“The Byouki.”

A Byouki was a cat Youkai from the continent that was created in a Kodoku ritual, a powerful curse made by placing countless poisonous insects in a single jar and having them kill each other. Its primary power was to apply a variety of diseases to whoever it possessed.

Or it drove them insane and made them kill indiscriminately.

The term “Toori-Ma” was used to describe normal criminals in modern times, but it originally referred to a paranormal phenomenon. A Toori-Ma was believed to possess people and cause them to commit unthinkable crimes.

Also, the Byouki user belonged to Shinshou Hitsubatsu, an organization that dealt with criminals who ended up not being convicted of their original crime because of the Youkai involvement.

“So that’s it.”

They would possess the criminal and have them commit another crime. They would send the criminal back to court until they finally received the death penalty. They were causing more crimes to punish criminals and they were using the very Youkai that made punishment so difficult, but it was obvious that they viewed themselves as an exception. They would probably claim they were making a noble sacrifice while letting civilians die at the hands of their Toori-Ma.

So what was I to do?

Ranzono Sachi was not the sort of Toori-Ma talked about in tabloids. Her power and desire to destroy had been amplified by a paranormal being known as a Byouki. The fact that her appearance and physical strength did not match was obvious enough from the cruel gashes in the police officers and the handcuffs broken with her bare hands.

I could of course settle this by sending out my Illness Magic.

However, I had no guarantee that her young body could withstand any further burden. I was not aware of any clinical studies to determine what happened to the human body when both a Byouki and Illness Magic were placed inside it.

That meant I could try holding back.

But that only worked if I was alone. I glanced at the barely-breathing police officers lying on the ground. Could I really hold back while also covering for all of them?

They were on the verge of death, but they were not dead yet.

Ranzono Sachi could still escape this without becoming a murderer. …Even if this would be the end of her short life.

“What will you do?”

She only growled back at me.

I narrowed my eyes and decided to question her as much as I could.

“How do you want this to end?”

I did not get a second chance.

The beast approached with a tremendous noise. She held her bloody claws and fangs at the ready, so her hostility was clear. My top priority was dealing with the Byouki user, crushing Shinshou Hitsubatsu, and removing this thorn in Hyakki Yakou’s side. Ranzono Sachi herself was only a detour.

Part of me did wonder if that was the right way to think about this.

And that hesitation would allow Ranzono Sachi’s crimes to continue and sully her soul even further.

So I made up my mind, pulled out a charm, and prepared to release the Illness Magic.

But before I could, the mountain split open as an Oomukade charged out and acted as a shield against Ranzono Sachi’s violence.

With a metallic sound, her claws were deflected backwards. I kept my Illness Magic on standby, narrowed my eyes, and asked a question.

“A centipede, huh? You were in that restaurant and on the bank with the courier, weren’t you? Your size was a fair bit different, though.”

“Will you leave Sachi to me?”

“Explain.”

“I checked around the area inside the earth. The actual user will be here soon. Defeating them is what you-…”

“No,” I cut in. “I wasn’t asking why I should leave. I want to know why you would put yourself in danger here.”

The Oomukade seemed to briefly hesitate but finally gave a clear answer.

“Sachi ended up like this because she committed a crime to protect me. She stepped out of line because I tried to protect her.”

“…”

“She is my friend, so I simply cannot allow this to be how it ends! And I made a promise with the others who stopped her crimes. I promised I would return Sachi to that place. I was hopeful that she would have a future with those people who accepted her!!”

“Then do as you wish,” I spat out.

I turned my back on Ranzono Sachi.

She was not my real enemy. I had someone else to deal with.

“I’ll deal with the insignificant Byouki. You can have the starring role this time.”

I jumped and leaped from the rocky area to the hairpin curve above and utilized my sense of smell. They were nearby and approaching. I glanced around, stopped my eyes on one point, and ran in that direction.

I left the poorly-maintained road and entered the dark, dark forest.

The users of Illness Magic and a Byouki faced each other in the corrosion and decomposition of nature.

I heard a giggling sound.

She looked thirteen or fourteen. She was not as slender as Ranzono Sachi who had been turned into a Toori-Ma, but she was still only a small girl. Her black hair was shoulder length and she had white skin with a healthy flush to it. However, she looked somehow sickly with an eyepatch over one eye and several bandages wrapped around her in places. She wore a short yellow China dress that had enough fabric removed to see her navel. On top of that, she wore a cat ear decoration and a blue jacket. She controlled a Youkai from the continent, so she was the barrier containing the paranormal creature. In other words, she was the jar used to create the Kodoku venom. The blue represented darkness and the yellow the warning color of a venomous insect. …No, she may not have been thinking too much about the symbolism. I couldn’t explain the long sock on just one leg or the comical bandages plastered all over the other leg.

“How cool.”

She sounded just like a little girl.

It was a pure and unconcerned comment like a child watching a superhero on TV.

“You really are cool. Ha ha. I’m not even being ironic, mister. Our industry is full of powers that break the rules, so it’s super cool that you can live there like some kind of samurai! I could never pull it off.”

“…”

“I’m hopeless. Completely hopeless. Everything about me is hopeless. I’m trying to do a good job and I have the best possible plan in my head, but it never works out. It all crumbles away in the end. So, y’see…”

She placed her slender index finger on her soft pink lips and laughed.

“Ha ha. So I can’t hold back here☆ I won’t be safe unless I kill you.”

A great roar burst out.

Dark shadows swept out in every direction from the Byouki user’s feet. They instantly swallowed up the entire surface of the ground, transforming the entire forest into her territory. The trees began to rustle like the mountain itself was talking about me behind my back.

“I hate when things get all bogged down, so I’ll explain everything from the get-go, mister.”

As the entire world throbbed and pulsed eerily, the Byouki user kept her sparkling eyes on me and opened her mouth.

“My Byouki is pretty smartly made. Simply put, even if I don’t manually set it up, it’ll find its own targets. It will search for whoever I consider my enemy and automatically produce the quantity and quality of Byouki needed to defeat them.”

With a sound like slurping mud, shadows, shadows, shadows, and more shadows rose up all around me. Masses of illness that looked just like the girl filled the world in no time at all. There were so many that numbers like one hundred or two hundred were useless.

“So it doesn’t matter how hard you work, mister. The cleverer you get, the more Byouki there will be and they’ll wear you down with their numbers. The Byouki will multiply endlessly until they’ve torn you to pieces with their long claws. Do you understand the rules now?”

“…”

I of course had no intention of sitting idly by and letting her kill me.

I scattered charms around. Inside the storm of paper of my own creation, I raised the index and middle fingers of my injured right hand and thrust them forward like I was holding a sword.

The Illness Magic gathered together like a storm and became a pitch black sword.

“Cursed Sword – Michizane.”

“Oh, c’mon. Didn’t I tell you getting serious would only create more Byouki?”

“Self-destruct. …Transform as a lesson to all disease.”

“?”

The Byouki user gave a puzzled frown when she saw the sword burst from within.

I continued regardless.

“Holy Sword – Tenjin. Cast aside your form as a tool of Sugawara’s vengeful spirit and release your divinity.”

Pure-white light surged out.

In the instant of its manifestation, it erased even the concept of sound.

A glowing sword erupted from my fingertips with double the previous force. This was a portion of the noble power that had begun as a vengeful spirit with a grudge against Kyoto and had eventually been worshipped into godhood. Just like a serum could be made from a toxin, I could transform my great knowledge of negative power into this positive power. This was the archenemy of illnesses like us.

This was not how it was meant to be used, so I could feel it tearing at me from within.

But I ignored that, aimed the tip of the blade, and stared straight at my enemy’s face.

“Ha… Ha ha☆”

“Here I go. Prepare yourself.”

“Wow! Wow, wow! How can you do things like that!? Illness users are supposed to be creepy, dirty people who live surrounded by scorn and disgust, so how can you transform that into such a refreshing lifestyle!? You’re amazing! You’re so mature!!”

The Byouki user rejoiced as if she were truly, truly impressed by something.

“But,” she added. “Didn’t I tell you? I’ll still wear you down with numbers.”

With an army of thousands…no, tens of thousands at her beck and call, the girl transformed from soldier to commander.

She claimed to be supplied with exactly the fighting force she needed. If that was true, there was no way for me to win. No matter how much strength I mustered, I was destined to fall to my knees here.

But that would only mean my defeat.

It would not mean Hyakki Yakou’s defeat. My defeat was sure to reveal the enemy’s system and provide a starting point toward defeating it. And if the Oomukade could bring Ranzono Sachi back to her senses, the girl would have a chance to disappear. As long as she did not rely on a vehicle, the search system using the robot brake system was useless.

Oh.

So even if I lose, I’ll still win.

“Ready to surrender?”

“I have no reason to. Not a single one.”

“Ha ha. Mister, you really are cool, so tell me your name. You’re making my womb throb, so I want to call your name at least once.”

My name.

That was an obvious request, but I almost laughed.

“I no longer have a flag to raise or a home to return to.”

I prepared my glowing sword of light as I answered.

So…

“You can call me a nameless soldier.”

That was all I said.

And immediately afterwards, Illness Magic and Byouki clashed head-on.

Part 11 (3rd person)

The unchanged Oomukade confronted the utterly changed Ranzono Sachi in the mountain rocks.

Words would no longer reach the girl. The slightest mistake would allow her to tear into the barely-breathing police officers and place the definitive crime of murder on her shoulders. But if he carelessly struck her slender form, he could easily kill her.

Legend had it the Oomukade's shell was hard enough to deflect an attack from any weapon.

However, he could not rely on that either.

After all…

"Grr…grr…gwaaah!"

Each time the girl growled, drool flowed from her mouth like a starving animal.

The Byouki, a type of Toori-Ma, would possess people and reveal their violent side.

Ranzono Sachi had received the most suffering not from the changes to her outer appearance forced on her by Kasane_12 or by the personality-altering seminar meant to transform her into a genius girl. The greatest wound had been realizing no one knew who she really was.

And the Oomukade himself had rejected her criminal plan and tried to stop her.

The Oomukade believed he had been right in doing so, but she had to have wondered why he did not understand.

So…

The destructive desires forcibly dragged out of her had turned toward the Oomukade.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"Sachi!!"

The girl's speed completely outdid the Youkai's.

Ranzono Sachi moved entirely outside his field of vision and approached from his blind spot. She charged at his long body and bit down into his repulsive body.

That was his one weakness.

According to legend, an Oomukade had been killed by an arrowhead with saliva on it, but the most primitive saliva-covered weapon was of course the human teeth.

No matter how large a centipede grew, it could not escape its position as a victim on the food chain.

The Oomukade heard a tremendous tearing sound as his outer shell was torn apart. A sticky sound followed and the non-red fluid characteristic of bugs poured out.

From the beginning, it had been impossible for him to attack Ranzono Sachi.

It was not an issue of strength. On a more fundamental level, it was simply impossible for him.

So he had been prepared for her to devour him like this.

But…

“Have you forgotten, Sachi?”

Even as he was consumed, he relaxed his entire body and spoke.

“The centipede became a Youkai for more than its many legs and disturbing appearance. It was believed to have a powerful enough venom to act as the catalyst for a curse. It was that collection of fear that created a Youkai like me.”

In other words…

“If you wish to eat me…cough…then eat as much as you want. But remember one thing: that venom will reach your body first of all, Sachi!!”

The short girl began convulsing. As if a switch had been thrown, she collapsed to the ground without putting up the slightest resistance. This was a neurotoxin. It swiftly sealed her movements without taking her life.

Afterwards, only her shadow stretched unnaturally out from her.

No, it was the Byouki that had possessed her in the form of a shadow.

“You are the version of Kodoku from the continent, aren’t you?”

“…”

The shadow did not move. It could no longer control the girl now that she was paralyzed and it could not move as a shadow alone. It needed to control something that cast a shadow in order to move.

“In other words, you are a Youkai created by sealing poisonous insects and dangerous beasts inside a jar and letting them kill each other. To put it another way, another poisonous insect or dangerous beast should be able to devour you.”

The Oomukade gathered all of his strength and snapped his jaws.

He would protect Ranzono Sachi. And to keep that vow, he had already offered up his own entrails.

“So let’s try this, why don’t we? Let’s see which one of us prevails and which one of us is consumed!!”

Part 12 (Illness Magic User)

I cut.

I cut and sliced and chopped.

I cut and sliced and chopped and severed and bisected.

The only sound was the constant one of my blade beheading my enemies. I had already cut down more than five hundred Byouki, but the user remained unfazed. She giggled and spun around on the spot. Something like black smoke erupted in every direction from her feet and double the number of enemies I had defeated appeared.

I was being worn down, I was being surrounded, and they were gradually closing in on me.

“Ha ha. This is just like a zombie move, mister.”

An unnaturally impressed voice stabbed into my ears.

“That’s what makes this so amazing. Normally, you run away when zombies swarm you. You put your negative emotions on full display, shove everyone else out of the way, slam the door in their face, and lock it. So how can you keep acting like a samurai!? It’s amazing!! You have my respect!!”

She had said her praise was not ironic.

She had said she could not live this lifestyle.

The life she had lived had to have been a hopeless one. No matter how powerful she was – no, because of how powerful she was – she could not obtain anything she wanted and had been constantly rejected by everything around her. She had been treated like an infected corpse being carried to the incinerator. I could see that misguided life in my mind’s eye.

I pitied her, but the situation did not let me sympathize with her.

Working with Shinshou Hitsubatsu to kill Youkai-related criminals would not bring her life back on track. She had not targeted Ranzono Sachi because she wanted to help anyone. The Byouki was created by letting poisonous insects and dangerous beasts kill each other in a jar, so she had no pressing reason to attack Ranzono Sachi’s community that had gathered an Oomukade and Tsuchigumo in one place.

She had decided some other people were less important than her and wanted to believe she could prove her superiority by attacking them. Shinshou Hitsubatsu’s claimed to have a lofty goal, but they were essentially securing a target for bullying in order to create a place for themselves. They were no different from the horrible people who knew they would be targeted next, so they offered up someone even weaker so they could join the delinquent group themselves.

But this may have been the perfect ending for me.

I had betrayed my master, wandered in search of a place to die, and continued living an aimless life, so it would have been absurd for me to wish for a proper death. If I was to be killed, it would be by a horrible person, for no good reason, and at a meaningless time and place. That was the appropriate end for a fallen warrior.

Or so I had thought.

A moment later, a giant mass of metal fell toward the Byouki user.

“!?”

For the first time, she gave a look of surprise and swung her arms. A mass of blackness immediately wriggled upwards and tore apart the blunt object that would have crushed her.

Then she realized what it was.

“An aerial bomb!? But from where!?”

Both of us looked into the blue sky far overhead. A group of flying wing aircraft and some escort fighters flew leisurely above the clouds.

Then…

Is that…!?

My cellphone rang. I answered it while swinging Holy Sword – Tenjin in one hand and heard the Hishigami woman laughing.

“Ah hah hah!! Surprised, Illness Magic-chan? Hyakki Yakou’s young lady said it would be a shame to lose you, so she flew out here without thinking about the danger!! So are you still going to pretend to be a fallen warrior, hm!?”

“…!!”

It pissed me off to hear her telling me about Hyakki Yakou.

Still, this was a too much of an honor. There was simply nothing I could say.

“That’s also why the bomb had the fuse removed. But don’t worry. I’m supporting them from the surface using laser guidance. We won’t accidently drop one on your head, so keep at it.”

The Byouki user hesitantly looked my way.

She had looked impressed before, but…

“Amazing…”

Now she looked twice as impressed.

“My Byouki scans for a target or hostile element and automatically supplies the appropriate fighting force, so all I have to do is stand here.”

“But your scan has a range,” said the Hishigami woman. “It can’t reach ten thousand meters up in the air. …So Illness Magic-chan, the Byouki equation has fallen apart. You’d better live up to the young lady’s expectations.”

I once more stood before the Byouki user with my glowing sword in hand.

“Ha ha☆”

The enemy laughed.

It was a broken laugh with a somehow lonely look in the eyes.

“Amazing! You’re simply amazing!! You’re a disease, an illness, and an epidemic just like me… You’re so much like me, but you have so many friends!! And yet I…I couldn’t make a single one!!”

“Enough.”

I was no one special.

Just as Ranzono Sachi had the Oomukade, I had just happened to have Hyakki Yakou.

If this girl had had even one thing like that, she would not have ended up like this.

So…

“Once I settle all of this, you stand back up on your own two feet. I’ll be that special something for you.”

I raced through that world that’s perfect equation had fallen apart.

The white curve surged out and sliced through the black disease.

Part 13 (3rd person)

An unpleasant sticky sound continued.

A sticky purple liquid dripped from the Oomukade’s great maw to prove it had devoured the formless Byouki.

With that variety of Toori-Ma gone, Ranzono Sachi changed. She was still unconscious from the Oomukade’s venom and her brow was covered with a feverish sweat, but the harsh nightmarish look on her face had relaxed somewhat.

The Oomukade took a slow breath, but it was not over yet.

An ominous sound came from his body where the girl’s mouth had torn into him. The wound was not growing. Quite the opposite. He had been attacked by his greatest weakness – a blade covered in saliva aka a predator’s teeth – but the wound was already bubbling ominously and slowly shrinking. Left alone, it would soon close.

He had eaten the Byouki.

He had done so as a part of the heretical Kodoku ritual that set poisonous insects and dangerous beasts against each other in a jar and gathered their strength in the lone survivor.

It had been necessary to protect Ranzono Sachi, but the effects were already beginning to eat into his body.

“Sachi…”

Even so, the Youkai was satisfied.

If he was given this choice one hundred times, he believed he would give the same answer each and every time.

However…

He heard someone rudely walk up through the underbrush.

Then someone's face poked out from behind the broken guardrail.

"Hi, hi! I knew something interesting had to be going on here. I was right to delay our plan until the last second."

"Who are you?"

"Hi there. I'm the Aoandon. It might surprise you, but I'm the final boss. Nice to meet you☆"

The female oni wore a white kimono, had long bluish hair, and a single knife-like horn on her forehead. The Oomukade had heard the legends of her appearing at the end of the Hyakumonogatari.

She casually snapped her fingers.

That was all it took for Ranzono Sachi to wake up from the Oomukade's neurotoxin.

This did not please the Oomukade.

It felt like this other Youkai held a switch or remote control for the girl.

"Now, now. Don't you worry. I'm the being found only after bringing together one hundred different fears. *You need more than your fingers to count the number of paranormal powers I can use.* Removing the poison from her body is a piece of cake."

"What do you want with us?"

"I want to give you an invitation."

The Aoandon grinned as she replied.

A bluish-white phosphorescent light burned at the tip of her horn all the while.

"*I was thinking of destroying Japan a little,* so if you like, would you join my team? It looks like you two have an interesting enough reason to do so."

"Wha-…?"

"I'm the ally of anyone who wants change, so I respect Sachi-chan's decision to create an equally repulsive world for the Oomukade, Tsuchigumo, Nue, and any other Youkai called creepy or disgusting. I'm willing to chip away at my own body to help you fulfill that. So what'll you do?"

"You can't. You can't, Sachi!! You must not listen to what she says! You came to your sense in Noukotsu Village, didn't you!? Remember what the people there said!!"

But the Oomukade's words did not reach her.

But that was not because Ranzono Sachi had become so fixated on one thing that she lost sight of all else.

“I…I can…help all my friends…”

“Sachi!! …No, wait. What is this!?”

The Oomukade glared at the Aoandon, but the female oni was still smiling with her horn emitting its phosphorescence.

“Eh? Oh, c’mon. All I did was open the door to Sachi-chan’s heart. I’m not writing anything extra in there.”

“That bewitching flame on your forehead… It doesn’t affect Youkai, but it does something to the human heart, doesn’t it!? You’re using that to deceive Sachi!!”

“It’s apparently a type of hypnotism. But you can let this much slide, can’t you? The Hyakumonogatari ritual I was made by involves lanterns or candles in a dark room. You wouldn’t believe how many fools have tried to write me off as brainwashing, suggestion, or mass hysteria. That’s a problem for me, so what’s wrong with making up for it by using those methods for myself?”

Even as we spoke, Ranzono Sachi began to move.

She moved unsteadily up from the rocky area and toward that Aoandon on the cliff.

Her feet were about to slip and she was on the verge of falling into the abyss below.

“I won’t allow you to spread the violence any further…”

“So? Didn’t I tell you I’m the being found only after bringing together one hundred different fears? You’re just one of my meals, so what can you hope to do?”

There may indeed have been nothing he could do.

She was on a higher level than him as a Youkai, so sitting idly by may have been the right decision.

But…

If he resisted, he would be killed and he would not even provide a distraction that allowed the girl to escape.

He knew that, but he still held a hope deep in his heart. After his friend had made up for everything she had done, he wanted to see her face those boys from Noukotsu Village again. He wanted to see Ranzono Sachi as she was truly surrounded by human smiles.

So…

A great roar rang out.

In that moment, the Oomukade became a dragon. The wind swirled around him and he rose upwards. He leaped over Ranzono Sachi and tried to devour the Aoandon on the cliff.

He did not actually harm her in the slightest.

He was blocked by an invisible wall and his jaws were stopped right in front of her face.

“Ah ha ha!! Yes, that’s it! That ‘but’! That ‘so’! That’s what’s so beautiful! See, you can do it if you try! I was certain you were going to devour your own belly to commit suicide and rob Sachi-chan of her motivation, so…”

A proud look filled her face, but she trailed off.

A purple liquid dripped down from the Oomukade’s mouth.

This was his new trait gained by devouring the Byouki and overwriting himself with the Kodoku ritual.

That single drop fell right on the Aoandon’s beautiful face.

“————!!!???”

An intense sizzling sound followed like someone was stir frying in a wok.

She held her face and finally took a few wobbling steps back. But then she revealed why.

“Ha ha.”

She was laughing.

She was not overwhelmed with rage. She was overwhelmed with pure delight. She had caught a glimpse of a world outside of the pre-established harmony and that world was created by those who wished to help others via change, so she formed a sublime smile.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Amazing! This truly is amazing! Rejoice! I was really only planning to bring Sachi-chan with me, but you’ve piqued my curiosity. I’m so, so interested in you now!! So I’ll take you too and let you join my team!!”

“I never asked for that!!”

“But Sachi-chan will join me.”

She turned around. By the time she tilted her head, the brilliant burn that had to be there had entirely vanished. More importantly, her words had torn into the Oomukade’s heart.

“And once she leaves, you’ll never be able to find us again. So what will you do? *Personally, I think you should come with us if you really want to save Sachi-chan.*”

He had no choice.

He snapped his jaws opened and closed, but he had to obey.

He thought back to Noukotsu Village and the boys who had stood up to save Ranzono Sachi. He expressed his deep, deep thanks to the one who had it in him to call Sachi pretty after seeing her true face.

And after that, he made up his mind.

Even if it meant straying from the proper path, he would bring Ranzono Sachi back to those boys.

“Understood. I will do as you wish.”

“Heh heh. I would expect nothing less from someone who wants change! I really do like that decisiveness.”

“But are you sure? I am prepared to do anything to save Sachi. I will almost certainly destroy your plan from within.”

“So you’ll be a fly in the ointment? Or maybe a centipede in the ointment!? Just kidding!!”

The Aoandon laughed like a young girl, but not because she did not see the Oomukade as a threat. He had in fact harmed her, but she was still accepting him. After all…

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m the ally of anyone who wants change.”

Part 14 (Illness Magic User)

I had defeated the Byouki user.

Holy Sword – Tenjin was not a deadly blade. It had been given the name of a god that loathed blood, so that was to be expected. It cut through distortions in the world’s laws, so it corrected the fluctuations in people’s hearts. And it did so as forcefully as possible. A normal mind would be left bedridden for two or three days.

“All done?”

The Hishigami woman appeared holding a large binoculars-like unit that was likely the laser guidance support device for the bombing. The small canine Sunekosuri was trembling and looking around at her feet.

“That should be obvious.”

“ ‘I’ll be that special something for you’? C’mon, are you saying Hyakki Yakou did all this just to help an umbrella-making ronin find a wife? I can’t believe this!!”

“Stop twisting my words.”

“Twisting your words? What could you possibly be talking about? Tee hee.”

“Quit acting like a child. It’s creepy for someone as old as you.”

“Shut up, you gloomy wifeless pedo. Don’t you realize it’s things like calling me ‘old’ that causes people to take what you say the wrong way?”

“More importantly…”

“Yeah, how about you go bow down to the young lady? She can’t exactly land here, so it’ll have to be at the nearest airport.”

But as we were speaking, something else suddenly arrived on the scene.

The murderous intent was so overwhelming that both the Hishigami woman and I nearly stopped breathing.

“Wha-…kh…ah!?”

I sent Illness Magic throughout my body to consciously control the movements of my organs and blood, but even then, I had my hands full simply keeping myself from blacking out.

The Hishigami woman was…not going to be any help. She had supposedly modified the structure of her human body itself, but she also had her hands full remaining conscious. We were in no state to fight.

Needless to say, the Sunekosuri had passed out cold.

Meanwhile, “he” arrived.

He rudely trudged right into Hyakki Yakou’s field.

“What a pain. I thought I understood what she was like when I joined forces with her, but I didn’t expect her to play quite this fast and loose with her own plans. It leaves me with so much work to do.”

He was an expressionless young man in a dark suit.

I silently glared at him and he responded without even moving his lips, like he was a ventriloquist.

“My name is Saiki Kazu, former assassin, former fortuneteller, formerly suicidal, formerly unemployed, and now…what even am I? Not even I know.”

Even as he gave his offhand introduction, he was not looking at us.

He was looking at the Byouki user lying on the humus.

“What are you…planning to do?”

“Retrieve her. The Aoandon wants her. I don’t want the Aoandon in a bad mood, so I’m granting as many of her selfish whims as I can.”

“…”

“Stop that. I don’t want to do this either. Ranzono Sachi, the Oomukade, and the manager of the Ubasute Apartments…was she called Yamame Kyouka? Anyway, she chased after those prisoner transport vehicles to recruit them. And now it’s the Byouki user at the center of Shinshou Hitsubatsu. Mix such a motley group together and it’s almost laughable. Does she believe in world peace or something?”

When I connected the names I head together in my head, something felt intensely wrong.

“Bringing them together would never make a cohesive fighting force.”

“No. They’ll most likely end up killing each other. But that’s fine as long as the battle provides the winner with enough experience points. In the end, it will still give us a powerful addition to our team.”

I was reminded of the Kodoku ritual.

Countless poisonous insects and deadly beasts were stuffed in a jar where they would fight to the death to increase the power of a toxin or curse.

What if the strange aura I felt from this man named Saiki Kazu was the same?

What if their “team” was the exact opposite of a group that licked each other’s wounds?

“The Aoandon will make her move before long.”

That evil monster carried the limp Byouki user over his shoulder and spoke without moving his lips.

“Once the time comes, you will understand all too well.”

Finally, he seemed to notice a change in the formation of flying wings in the sky. The escort fighters had swiftly changed positions.

But it was too late. If he had noticed the change, he needed to leave us and escape at full speed.

Saiki Kazu looked up in the blue sky and formed a gun with his hand.

He said “bang” and pretended to fire.

That was all he did.

The flying wing carrying Hyakki Yakou’s highest leader was destroyed.

I was caught completely off guard.

I briefly forget all else due to the burning tension and impatience.

Meanwhile, countless fragments rained down on the rural city. The great height of ten thousand meters seemed to demonstrate that the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

“This is our power. So you cannot stop anything we are doing. Not one thing.”

That voice seemed to be coming from hopelessly far away.

“So tremble in fear and wait for the world to change.”

After whispering those words, the shadow in a dark suit left with the girl over his shoulder.

He left nothing at all behind.

Part 15 (Illness Magic User)

I ran.

I ran and ran and ran and ran.

All around the rural city, windows had shattered and obstacles fallen from the sky had caused traffic accidents. The city was wrapped in dark smoke and soot. I even spotted some houses with entirely collapsed roofs.

As I moved further and further in, the rubble grew larger and the flickering orange flames grew more common.

At one point, the wreckage of a flying wing stuck up from the ground like a gravestone and a group with the same scent as me was gathered around it. They surrounded something…no, someone.

Hyakki Yakou cared about bloodline more than all else. When met with troubles like this, they would naturally gather around and cling to “blood”.

So who would they obey first and foremost? Who had the noblest blood?

“Hafuri-sama…”

The name escaped my mouth.

The last time I had seen her, she had been ten years old. What would have happened had that small girl been caught in the explosion and thrown into the air at ten thousand meters up?

“Hafuri-sama!!”

I forced my shaking consciousness to cooperate and ran to the center. The group turned toward me. The wave of people split to either side as if creating a path and revealing the truth.

And there in front of me, I found…

“There is no need to worry. I am here, Illness Magic.”

I found a dignified voice.

Hyakki Yakou was not dead. It may not have been much, but that “blood” had been preserved.

The Mamedanuki that acted as her body double stood next to her and Hafuri-sama’s small hand soothed a crying Sunekosuri child.

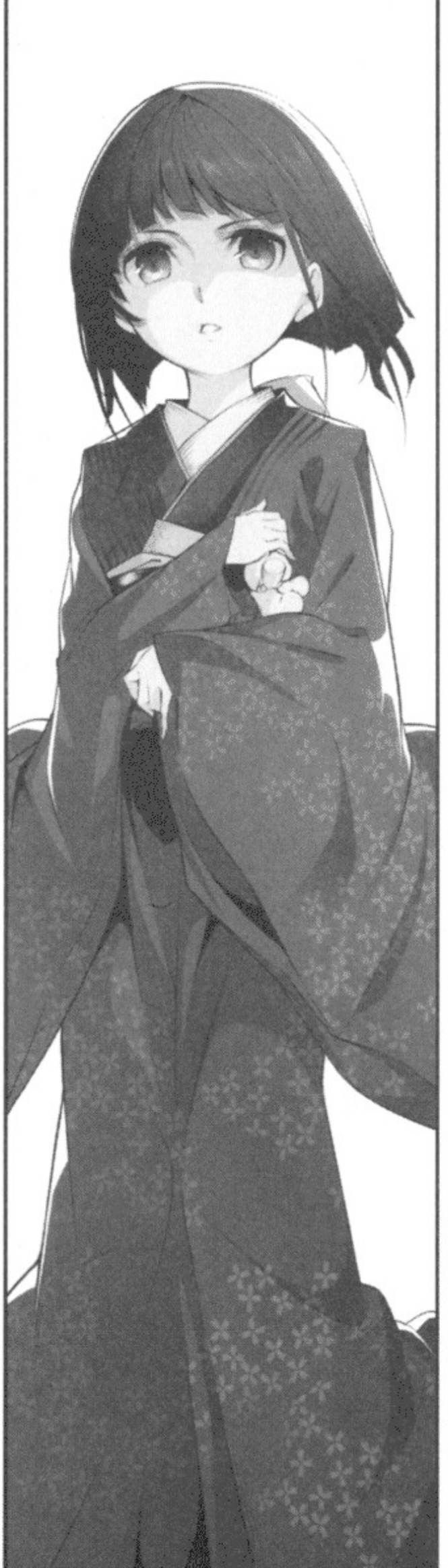
The other four of the Top Five had been aboard that flying wing. Plenty of Youkai had as well. One or all of them must have used their powers to protect Hafuri-sama. They were so very loyal when compared to someone like me who could only kill.

“Illness Magic.”

Hafuri-sama spoke to me.

そこで。

百鬼夜行の最高統治者は無法者へこう言葉を投げかけてくださった。



「青行灯らその一味を撃滅し、この国を救います。もしも彼女達が奪ったものがあるのなら、それが人であれ物であれ全て奪還します。そのために、私の一部になりなさい」

それ以上の言葉など、きっと、この世には存在しなかった。

I immediately bent my knees, placed my hands on the ground, and pressed my forehead into the dirt.

“You took part in a coup d’etat and remained on the run after it was quashed, so I would normally be forced to pass judgment on you. But given the situation, you know this is no time to get held up over those matters, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“I cannot allow this scene of flames and smoke I see. The Aoandon’s group intends to spread this scene throughout the entire nation, so we must stop them. We are the descendants of those who failed to become crabs at Dan-no-Ura. We are those who accepted our fall and began working behind the scenes rather than on the main stage of history. But we still live and have decided to create a world in which we can smile alongside those who live here with us.”

“Of course.”

“Illness Magic.”

At that moment, Hyakki Yakou’s highest leader was kind enough to speak to an outlaw.

“We will defeat the Aoandon and her group and we will save this country. If they have stolen anything, we will retrieve it all, whether it is a person or an object. Join me in that effort.”

No other words could possibly have surpassed those.

Chapter 4: Conclusion@???

Part 1 (3rd person)

Something was wrong.

The individual events were barely related, so looking at them individually revealed little. But if one took a step back and looked at the scene as a whole, something would feel horribly off. It was like the difference between a single piece and the entire jigsaw puzzle.

“A largescale power outage has hit Hokkaido. While running from the police, a driver lost control and ran into a transformer facility. Five elderly residents have died because they were using medical breathing machines at home. The police have said they did the best they could to apprehend the suspect, but…”

“New-chan > This has completely buried the chairman’s scandal, hasn’t it? I wonder if he caused this trouble to help with damage control.”

No-name blogs and SNS sites were filled with baseless conspiracy theories. And sadly, those useless opinions ended up burying the truth in a flood of information, so no one knew what was really going on. They simply felt a vague sense of unease.

“Town gas in the Tokai region is still shut down. An emergency inspection is being performed after a cyber-attack of unknown origin attempted to rewrite the program controlling the internal pressure of the underground pipes, but the residents are demanding service be restored as soon as possible.”

“Eruko > Water, power, gas, internet… All the major pipelines of the country’s infrastructure are being attacked. The sewage system is the one that actually scares me the most. It connects to every house and it’s full of gas and waste. Set it alight and toxic dioxin will burst into every single house. Gas masks are thirty thousand yen at the cheapest, but it’s probably worth that price given the situation.”

Products vanished from convenience store shelves. A man who had created a homemade shelter in his yard was invited onto a talk show. The mysterious turn of events influenced the stocks of corporations that sold disaster prevention and outdoor goods and the nation’s tension gradually grew.

“An N Alert was sent out in error. Early this morning, a biological weapon alert was sent out to the entire Kanto region, but it turns out it was due to a Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare worker who failed to set the system to training mode. This is the third erroneous N Alert this month alone, so the Minster of Health, Labor, and Welfare has sworn he will crack down on any undisciplined workers.”

“Packy > Um, this isn’t the Boy who Cried Wolf. If you keep sending out false alarms, no one’s gonna believe it when something does happen.”

The news was repeated on TV ad nauseam to ensure no one was misled by the false alarm, but that only spread the absurd rumors further. It almost seemed the people living their boring lives wanted to believe the lies.

“I’m worried about this country. I’ve studied abroad in London, Paris, and New York, so I know how great their crisis management systems are. Compared to them, Japan is awfully unprepared.”

“Nekosuke > Don’t sound so carefree about it, four eyes. But…it’s possible that rumor is true. Y’know, the one about a huge nuclear shelter for VIPs being prepared in Nagatacho Station next to the National Diet building. Maybe that’s why they don’t seem worried.”

Was that a prophecy based on a sense of smell they rarely used or was it a hope not even they knew they had?

Either way, something was about to happen.

There was no stopping it.

Part 2 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Maybe the shipments had been delayed by the spreading panic or some housewife had decided to stock up meaninglessly, but the convenience store shelves were empty and I missed out on eating lunch.

The trains had been stopped for a few days due to signal trouble and small traffic jams had popped up here and there. While I complained in my heart that Tokyo was a real pain in the ass to live in once things went wrong, I made my way to Minato.

Keijou Ijuku University was there.

The campus was filled with school buildings and laboratories, but I visited the big building known as the “Headquarters” where the board of directors and management were gathered.

“Detective.”

“What is a middle school girl doing on a college campus?”

“Open! Campus!! It’s October, remember? The college is open to anyone.”

“Excuse me, this girl is trespassing. Yes, yes. Can I leave her with you? Please get her out of here ASAP. Yes, thank you.”

“Hey!! Don’t sell me off to that old janitor!!”

The Mystery Freak started assaulting a police officer, but in a cutely sulky kind of way. As usual, she was more or less wearing a swimsuit with a character scarf added on. Just as I was wondering what to do about her, a familiar face approached with a smile.

“Long time no see, Uchimaku-kun. …I thought Minori was pulling my leg when she told me, but it looks like a police officer really is dragging around a middle school girl in a swimsuit.”

“Please don’t say that!”

I could tell my future was on the line here, so I immediately corrected her.

The woman was named Tsugawa San. She was a scientist girl with long, wavy chestnut hair. She wore a crisp lab coat over her skirt and her soft and fluffy sweater. That unbalanced look had gathered attention even when we were students. Of course, she was actually a gentle person with drooping eyes.

What's her title now anyway? Assistant professor? Associate professor? It changes so much I can't remember.

She had a complex about her given name, so she got upset whenever someone used it with the "-san" honorific. She didn't seem to like being "San-san".

That was when another old upperclassman of mine, an assistant producer from Hachi TV named Atou Minori, showed up. She wore a rough top, slender pants, a hairpin to hold up her black hair, and a choker around her neck, so her tastes hadn't changed since we were students either.

"Hey, Hayabusa-kun. It's been a while since you visited the school here, hasn't it?"

"What are you doing here when you've already graduated? You'll just get in the way."

"I pop in to help with documentaries on summer break experiments and things like that. But I'm starting to remember old times with all of us here. Wait…old times? I'm turning into an old lady, aren't I!?"

That was when I heard an odd sound.

I looked over to find the Mystery Freak growling like a fierce dog restrained by a chain.

Tsugawa smiled.

"Yeah, we were in different departments, but we joined the same club. I forget what excuse of a name we gave it, but we just used it to go out drinking. We gathered the students from Intellectual Villages around the country. That really was a happy time. And you had the best taste in restaurants and bars, Uchimaku-kun. You never seemed to choose a dud."

"C'mon, I wasn't that good."

"But the best drinks were the bottles you had in your room. The Jinnai Brewery almost scares me! They kept sending you tons of junmai daiginjo good enough for the Ise Shrine! Pretty much every weekend, we hung out in your room getting drunk off our asses until morning!"

Enbi was growling even louder and her face had grown so red I half-expected steam to rise from her head. I didn't quite get it, but it was unusual for her to take so much damage.

"I! Can't! Stand!!! This!!!!"

"Can't stand what, Mystery Fre- ah, that's just creepy!! Don't shove that scarf's severed head into my face!? It looks way too realistic up close!!"

"It's Suneky the Sunekosuri!!"

Tsugawa laughed.

“Um, miss, you’re never going to win over Uchimaku-kun like that.”

“Grr?”

“He’s a complete pervert with glasses, a tight skirt, and a garter belt as his Three Sacred Treasures. If you pull on the garter belt so it snaps against your leg, he just can’t help but look.”

“Bfh!? Wait! No! Don’t! Don’t tell her-…!”

“His ideal woman is a female teacher. Such a troublesome fetish.”

“Nooo!”

“But unfortunately, the perfect beautiful teacher that he imagines will strictly but kindly guide him would be younger than him nowadays.”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!???”

As I screamed, Enbi pulled out her smartphone and started whispering into it. I didn’t even want to know what audio notes she was taking.

At any rate…

“We can keep talking on the way. Come with me.”

“Oh, sure.”

“You’re a detective, so you already know the basic information, right?”

Tsugawa handed me a large pamphlet as she spoke. It looked less like a proper document and more like an advertisement meant to catch the eye.

I read aloud the caption written next to the smiling elderly man on the cover.

“The leading researcher into psychic powers: Matsukai Hiroshi, Professor of Human Parapsychology Information Engineering.”

“Don’t let that ‘leading researcher’ part fool you. No other university in the nation has a department as ridiculous as Human Parapsychology Information Engineering. It’s like saying you serve the original mille crepe ramen.”

Atou Minori jokingly cut in from the side as I flipped through the pamphlet (to double check on the information) while walking.

“Help from PSI_ver_RAIN (14) was used to gather objective and universal sample data.”

Minori laughed.

“PSI_ver_RAIN is a psychic middle school girl. Or rather, she’s an online idol that pretends to be one. She wears swimsuits, sings, and bends spoons on video sites and

the like. Her supposed psychic powers are all over the place: clairvoyance, telekinesis, healing, etc. She's more convenient than a Swiss army knife."

Of course, she was better known as someone who danced with 3D models based on Vocanoids than as someone who could bend spoons with her mind.

"She's appeared on our show a few times, but based on the fans' reactions, they see her psychic powers as part of her character instead of something real. Y'know, like the airheaded idols who claim to be from some other planet or the ones who dress in costumes and claim to be a fruit spirit. Basically, if they're cute, anything goes."

"Can you really use a screenname in a thesis paper?"

"Normally, no. But there have been cases where someone like a national comedian who wrote a book that got translated into fourteen languages eventually published a thesis under a stage name or penname. They forced this through using those precedents."

My former upperclassmen climbed the stairs with their heels clacking on the steps.

"Not to mention that Matsukai Hiroshi himself is an incredibly famous professor. It's to the point that I feel like posting a sign in front of his lab saying 'The Constitution of the Empire of Japan does not apply beyond this point'."

"Okay, I'll bite. Don't you mean the Constitution of Japan?"

"That's just how out-there he is. It's kind of amazing he hasn't been arrested. Well, he is talented, so maybe he has someone secretly burying corpses for him."

That was hardly a laughing matter to a police officer.

And…

"Who would have thought that eccentric professor would end up sliced in two inside a locked room?"

The strobe light of camera flashes reached the hallway from the open door.

I peeked inside and found the interior covered in red. It was filled with a strange unpleasant odor that was not simply blood. For being a "laboratory", it was not filled with largescale research equipment. Other than the desktop computer on the table, I couldn't see anything that looked like it could be used for work. Instead of a place filled with the hope of making an earthshaking discovery, it looked like a room meant to hide an eccentric as a way to keep up appearances.

But the center of the room was what mattered most.

The red-dyed star of the scene was lying face up and chopped in two just below the navel. I'll leave out the details of what was sticking out from the cut, but it didn't look like it had been done with a sharp blade or with any concern for the positions of the bones or muscles. Overall, it seemed to have been done quite forcefully.

I put on gloves and faced my upperclassmen.

"Thanks for guiding me here. I can take care of myself now."

“Can we watch? We won’t step inside.”

“If you film this on a pen CCD and show it on your show, you’ll get sued.”

I held back the Mystery Freak as she nonchalantly started into the room, I warned Atou Minori, and I went inside myself.

The crime scene investigation was still ongoing, but the area around the corpse had been dealt with first so they could get an autopsy done as quickly as possible. The forensics team was at the stage of discussing how to transport the corpse without its “contents” spilling out.

Pieces of evidence had been placed inside clear plastic bags and one of them was a card key.

“That was in his coat’s inner pocket. That’s what makes this a ‘locked room’,” explained one of them forensics team members.

“Did anything about this catch your interest? Other than the locked room part, that is”

“His wallet and the hard disk containing all his research data were untouched, but his belt is gone.”

“His belt?”

“Um, he was, well, a strange person, so it’s possible he wasn’t wearing one to begin with.”

“I’ll look into it when questioning people.”

I circled around the corpse and into the back of the room to check around the computer.

Wow, this is pretty old.

It was probably only used for email, writing reports, and to operate the supercomputer located in another room. The somewhat yellowed home computer was connected to a hard disk by a cable, but it wasn’t a convenient portable size like a USB memory stick or a data chip. I began to wonder if he stored everything on the cloud.

Then I heard the Mystery Freak sounding bored in the hallway.

“Detectiiive.”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you be focused on something else instead?”

“You mean that nonsense?”

“But now the state-run news is talking about it and not just the talk shows. Some idiot leaked the whole case on a video site, so all the stations are going nuts. But the reporter’s club of Japanese mass media is pretty strong. If they all ignored this, no

one would pay any attention to some leaked info. That means the police are half-admitting it already, doesn't it?"

"Minori-san, you aren't secretly recording this, are you?"

"Of course."

"Of course you are or of course you aren't?"

"Gh… Sorry, Hayabusa-kun, but of course I am. I'll be more careful in the future."

She pulled her cellphone from her pocket, operated it while I was watching, and raised both of her hands in defeat.

After confirming it was off, I started speaking again.

"Do you think a psychic murder is actually possible? Based on common knowledge anyway?"

"Why not? Packages that include Youkai are used for crimes all the time."

"Y'know, that's a lot like saying little grays must exist because you found a dinosaur fossil. Don't accept this because of something completely different. It's a non sequitur."

"But theses on psychic powers are starting to be seen as valid evidence in court. Or at least, the prosecution can submit it and the court will allow it."

"So they're going to conclude that psychic powers have been scientifically established as a deadly weapon, are they? I can already tell this is going to be the world's silliest trial."

"Ee hee hee. There are official records in England of people being taken to court over whether a magic cabal cursed them or not or whether some secret ceremony was leaked or not. The judgment papers are still there and everything."

The problem was the thesis paper on psychic powers published by the eccentric professor lying in two pieces on the floor.

Naturally, society at large saw him as a fraud. They doubted the thesis even more than the theories that video games rotted the brain. But no matter how ridiculous it was, a thesis was a thesis once it was submitted. That status came with a certain power.

Forensic science was pretty well known, but what even counted as "scientific"?

A lot of people thought it was any objective data that could be reproduced with experiments or that it was never-changing theories and equations someone had calculated out, but that was completely wrong.

In the end, it came down to what people believed was true. In research related to space or particles, the result of a single experiment could overturn everything we thought we knew and the equations used a year ago would become entirely useless. Even though what to research had been determined by those equations and billions of yen of tax money had been pumped into it, no one hung their head at the new

discovery. When it came down to it, even fabricated theses were held up as “scientific” until they were found out.

So-called “absolute science” changed surprisingly often and people would readily accept ideas that were barely understood but “probably” worked like this or that were “theoretically sound” but had not been remotely proven. The same was true of forensic science. And even if it was wrong, it was not considered a crime as long as no one was “maliciously aware” of the mistake. It was a lot like a politician’s apology. As long as you didn’t know about it before hand, you were in the clear.

That was the case this time, too.

Once it was placed in the category of “scientific” any thesis was treated as such.

The thesis was 99.9% bullshit, but some idiot insisted that it wasn’t 100% disproven. And once that happened, it didn’t matter how much everyone else opposed it. In the closed courtroom, a psychic murder was considered possible and the trial had to continue on that assumption. After all, it was a proper “scientific” thesis, wasn’t it? So it had to be perfectly acceptable in a “scientific” courtroom. From there, the judgment was made. The defendant was guilty of murdering the victim with psychic powers and would be imprisoned for life.

The judicial system? Who cares, right?

“But to completely eliminate the idea that psychic murders are possible, you would have to objectively prove that psychic powers don’t exist.”

“Nonsense. It’s not even worth thinking about. They don’t exist.”

“But, but. Actually proving it is surprisingly difficult. It’s what you call the Devil’s Proof. Even if you revealed the trick behind all self-styled psychics around the world, you’re done for as soon as someone argues that someone with psychic powers might be living deep in the mountains or something.”

“So that means the top suspect is…?”

“PSI_ver_RAIN. That psychic middle school girl had a personal connection to the eccentric professor since he got her help to gather sample data. She’s currently missing, but that caption might just change to ‘on the run’ before long.”

My head started to hurt.

Has this country been thrown into some mysterious space where tabloid articles come true?

“Some of the higher ups in the police apparently want to end this case as quickly as possible even if it means false charges.”

“Huh? The rumors I picked up said a politician wants to settle this sensational case to make himself look like a great hero just before the national elections.”

I held my head in a hand as I listened to my former upperclassmen cheerfully discuss the case.

My condolences, Matsukai-san. Your own thesis is dragging us further away from the truth of your murder. Maybe that's your own fault, but did you have to make it the police's problem too?

Part 3 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The lunch break came to an end and fifth period began.

It seemed like the stupidest possible time for home ec. Especially a cooking lesson.

"Ohhh, Shinobu-kun. How do I peel an onion?"

"Potatoes and carrots are one thing, but you can't even do onions, Madoka-san!?"

She wore an apron over her sailor uniform and a triangular cloth on her head even though I doubted anyone ever actually wore one in the real world. Kotemitsu Madoka had transformed into a wonderfully innocent-looking financial monster, but it turned out she was a little too innocent. A kindergartner would've been more help.

Of course, my parents made all my meals, so I couldn't cook for myself either.

My classmate looked like the perfect young wife, but she was pouting her lips and complaining.

"Ehhh? But doesn't food just appear when you're hungry? And with vending machines, you just have to know how to put a coin in. I doubt many people want to know how it works on the inside."

"Oh, no! Madoka-san's feminine appeal is dropping fast! And the worst part is she doesn't even realize it!!"

"Is it that bad?"

"Your innermost thoughts are coming right out! You aren't supposed to let guys see that!!"

The dish we were tasked with making was pork cooked in ginger, which seemed way too heavy for the period after lunch.

Our cooking station was oddly clean. The water and ingredients were Intellectual Village-made, but the plates and cooking utensils left at school could never have passed an inspection by a clean freak, so some kind of mystery cleaning squad must have infiltrated the school the night before.

"By the way, Madoka, what do you eat for a midnight snack? You respond immediately whenever I email you, so I know you're active late at night."

"Eh? I just make a call to my 24/7 room service."

"Whoa!! Now I'm jealous!!"

Madoka frowned as she picked at the surface of the onion.

"The net idols have been a real pain lately. They don't use an advertising agency but still gather a ton of attention. Ones like PSI_ver_RAIN can get thirty million views on

a new song’s PV in less than twenty-four hours. That’s more influential than an ad during golden week. Can you believe that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I have heard people talking about how cute Rain-chan is.”

“One silly comment about being hooked on Neko Manma’s Ishikari special and the stocks shoot up! How am I supposed to handle that with an autonomous investment program!? Wars and hurricanes at least have some warning!!”

Based on how angry Madoka-san was, I could guess she had lost a ton of money thanks to this Rain-chan.

I was afraid to ask exactly how much, though.

Nagisa-chan, my childhood friend and one of the world’s three greatest yanderes, was in top form at another cooking station. She was leaning on her boyfriend Akechi-kun and placing her head on his shoulder.

chun
chun

“Eh heh heh. Look, Akechi-kun. You just have to go like this and then like this. See? It’s shaped like a heart. Isn’t it pretty? It’s a crystallization of our love. Heh heh.”

“Y-yes, I suppose so. But you’re scaring me with how smoothly you’re using that knife…”

“And the most important part is adding in a secret ingredient. Eh heh heh heh heh heh.”

“Wait, please wait. Don’t put that in there. Not your hair. It won’t even dissolve. And I only confessed ten minutes ago, so isn’t it a little soon for that!? Waiiiiit!!”

I prayed for his happiness in my heart.

Good luck, Akechi Boy. Nagisa’s love is sweeter than chocolate, thicker than coal tar, and deadlier than tetrodotoxin, but not even I know what awaits you if you stick with it. Let’s see if you can outlast and arrive at that unseen frontier.

And…

“Ohhhh!! Jinnai, help!! I don’t know how to deal with Nagisa-chan!!”

“Don’t come crying to her ex, you idiot! Don’t you have any pride!?”

Part 4 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I finished my investigation for the time being and parted ways with my former upperclassmen. As I’d said before, I hadn’t had any lunch because the convenience store shelves were empty. I was starving, so I let another detective take my place, took a break, and used the university dining hall for the first time in forever. They were about to transport the body, so we wanted some police officers to walk around the area and gather attention elsewhere. It was a little late for lunch, so I wasn’t going to bother too many students even if I grabbed a bite to eat.

“You can eat right after looking at a corpse chopped in two with its organs sticking out? You’re really one of us, aren’t you?”

“It’s like being a doctor. Only someone who can get used to it can stick with the job for long. Sad as that is.”

As a young police officer, I had been taught not to get too fixated on the corpses and I had taken that to heart as much as I could. Some said we needed to get angry about people’s deaths, but after seeing so many people led to revenge, it all felt so fruitless. It was like reading a single book containing a dozen different short stories about a child dying of some horrible disease. Sure it’s a sad story, but so what?

“Wow, you can get a lot of food for cheap here. They even have cutlet curry. Cutlet curry! Not only do you get curry, but there’s a cutlet on top for only five hundred yen! And it’s got a ton of vegetables too!!”

“I think the best deal is the seafood bowl. They didn’t have the beef tongue meal when I was here. Is it a new addition? I guess I’ll try it.”

As we spoke, we made our order and received our trays.

There were a lot of girls in fairly showy miniskirts. Well, it was the end of October, so they were probably freshmen. They had escaped the long, long tunnel of entrance exams, finished their baptism in this new life, made it through their first summer break, and were finally truly fitting into their college life. It was probably the most carefree time for them.

“But…”

I didn’t see how I stood out that much, but I was gathering a lot of attention. From the actual college students, it may have been like seeing an old-looking high schooler in your middle school. It made me sad as an alumnus.

“Gulp! Gulp!! Damn, this cutlet curry is actually really good! I was expecting the meat to be really tough and the fried coating to come off the second you poked it with your fork!! Munch, munch!!”

“No, wait. It’s probably the middle school girl in an inappropriate swimsuit that’s gathering all the attention.”

“Eh? I hope you’re joking. Everyone’s curious about the police detective in a suit hanging around near the scene of a murder.”

“Hah hah hah. Yeah, right.”

My beef tongue was a simple dish sliced thin and cooked in salt, but the flavor wasn’t bad. The firmness of the tongue was still there. It was nice enough that I considered adding it to the rotation for when I was tired of the usual pork and ginger or chicken and egg bowl.

“Hand me your scarf, Mystery Freak. You’re going to get curry on it.”

“Nn.”

“C’mon, you don’t want to ruin that…what is it? A Rokuro Dog?”

“It’s Suneky!!”

We continued chatting like that for a while.

“Hey, detective, what do you think of this stuff with PSI_ver_RAIN? A psychic murder! A torso bisected!”

“That nonsense isn’t worth the investigation’s time.”

“But she was here on campus to help with his research today. And she completely vanished after the murder happened.”

“Are you saying she’s suspicious even if she doesn’t have psychic powers?”

“She’s definitely the murderer, but there’s no good evidence. So let’s find a way to get a guilty verdict even if it means making up some nonsense about psychic powers. After all, she’s the murderer either way! …Something like that?”

“That feels like something someone would do only after exhausting every other possibility. We’re only in the preliminary stages of the investigation and the autopsy hasn’t even begun, so why would the higher ups be in such a rush?”

“Hmm.” The Mystery Freak mixed her chopped cabbage into the curry sauce with a spoon. “Why was that professor even targeted in the first place?”

“He was apparently a really strange person, so it wouldn’t surprise me if he’d caused some trouble here and there. Of course, I’ll admit chopping his torso apart is a little over-the top. I would have expected a strangulation or blow from a glass ashtray.”

“What if it was to steal his research data?”

“We’ll investigate that too of course. The psychic research was apparently just a performance to appear on TV and get his name out there. His actual area of study was information engineering, but it must not have been interesting enough to get much research funding. That means he was doing proper research too.”

He was just like the people who appeared on TV as UFO or ghost researchers. No matter what methods they used, the divide between known and unknown was wide. And if you were known, things were a lot easier. Even if that meant playing the fool on TV. A lot of researchers knew that very well.

But…

“That doesn’t explain why they sliced him in two. It was like the murderer went out of their way to kill him in a more difficult way.”

“Detective, what are the most popular reasons to destroy a corpse?”

“A grudge, to transport the corpse, to send twisted presents to people, or to hide the victim’s identity if it’s the fingerprints or teeth. They’ll also sometimes gouge out a portion of the corpse to hide a bite mark or a distinctive wound.”

All of the professor’s parts seemed to have been there, so none of them fit but the grudge. Unless, of course, they were chopping him up to transport him and gave up partway through.

“Then how long would it take to destroy the corpse?”

“It depends on the tool being used. With a single knife, it would take twenty minutes to cut through the torso while putting all of one’s body weight into it. With an axe, ten minutes if you were careful about the fat that stuck to the blade. With a chainsaw, one minute. With liquid nitrogen, less than thirty seconds I guess.”

“A master swordsman with a katana could do it in one second.”

“And could a psychic do it in zero seconds?”

Then again, if the tool they were using was too powerful, they would need something like a giant cutting board to make sure they didn’t damage the floor. And the more irregular the tool, the fewer the possible suspects. For example, only a master swordsman would have a top level katana.

Huh? But doesn’t that mean…?

“Even if it was done with psychic powers, would a psychic really kill someone with their powers? They might as well leave a note on the scene saying they did it.”

“That’s true. That was the first thing that occurred to me, but it didn’t really lead me anywhere.”

Even if PSI_ver_RAIN had a grudge against Professor Matsukai, wouldn’t she specifically choose not to use her powers? It would have been safer to use a kitchen knife or utility knife anyone could get their hands on.

In movies and dramas, psychics would proudly proclaim that they could kill as much as they wanted because the cause of death couldn’t be scientifically proven, but that wasn’t actually how it worked. Plenty of murderers had been found guilty even with no murder weapon or corpse ever found. The evidence only had to indicate who had acted with the intent to harm who. Just because you were missing a motive, a murder weapon, a corpse, fingerprints, or DNA evidence didn’t mean you couldn’t establish that a crime had been committed.

Take burning someone to death as an example. Even if you didn’t know the exact chemical makeup of the flammable liquid, you could forcibly establish guilt as long as you had evidence showing Person A had poured a suspicious liquid on Person B just before they burst into flames and died. In a court of law, an unclear cause of death was not all that powerful a barrier.

Then again, whether it was a trick or not, I still had no idea why someone would go to the trouble of chopping the guy’s torso in two.

And in times like this…

“Thinking it through in reverse can be surprisingly helpful.”

“You mean thinking about what would have happened if he hadn’t been chopped apart?”

“Even if he’d been strangled, PSI_ver_RAIN still would’ve been a suspect due to her proximity to the eccentric professor. But setting that aside, *what if there was someone else who would have been a suspect if he hadn’t been chopped in two?* That would make all the work worth it.”

Staying at the scene for so long and getting evidence on your clothes from all the blood was a huge risk. Who had taken that risk to go through with that bisection? Whether it was PSI_ver_RAIN or a third party, it had to benefit them in some way.

“Well, either way, I just have to gather all the information I can.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“How about I start by asking you why you believe any information the police find will end up in your hands?”

While we continued our discussion, I felt a shift in the college students’ gazes inside the dining hall. They were all moving toward the window.

The focus on us outsiders had moved elsewhere, so had someone shown up who was an even more obvious “outsider”?

I initially thought of the corpse being transported, but I doubted they would carry it across the middle of the campus.

And when I looked out the window, I spotted a distinctive *sailor uniform* in the crowd.

Waist-length black hair had just the end dyed red. The white sailor uniform had red lines. The boots rose higher than the knees and they had a plastic-like material on the joint for an overall futuristic design.

“Hey, Mystery Freak. You stay here.”

“Hm?”

She looked confused with her spoon in her mouth, but I got up from my seat regardless.

“It’s PSI_ver_RAIN. She’s on campus for some reason, so I’m going to capture her. You watch from the window! If she vanishes before I get there, you tell me over the phone which way she went!”

Part 5 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I didn’t take off running like a scene from a police drama. I remained calm and composed. I left the dining hall, made my way to the nearest exit from the school building, and went outside. I stayed slow while blending in with the crowd. If you made it obvious you were chasing someone, they would start running with all their might. Getting as close as possible and then making a quick dash had the best odds of capturing them.

…Except she noticed me almost right away.

The girl in the sailor uniform turned right around and started running like a sprinter despite her short skirt.

“Oh, hell! I guess a suit really does stand out too much!!”

This required a bit of a change of plans. I started running in my suit, despite how it looked. I had to catch up to her. This really did look like a scene from a police drama, so I could tell cellphone cameras were pointing my way from all over. I almost crushed some kind of RC helicopter sitting on the ground for some kind of experiment. We were less than two hundred meters apart, but there was still a risk of losing sight of her when she ran around a corner.

And…

“Oopsie daisy.”

“!? Kyah!!”

The Mystery Freak suddenly rushed out from the side and tried to hit PSI_ver_RAIN with a janitor’s pushcart she had found somewhere. The fleeing girl just barely managed to dodge it, but she lost her balance as she kept running.

I chased after her and shouted to the Mystery Freak as I ran past.

“This is dangerous, so stay back!”

“Detectiiiive, don’t forget that I just kept her away from the nearest exit from campus.”

Is that what you were after? You are so not cute.

PSI_ver_RAIN had her hands full running, so she accidentally ran into an alleyway at some point. The narrow space was located between the concrete wall of a school building and the wall that surrounded the entire campus. It was apparently a nice storage space for the students because all the bicycles gave us even less room to move and trash bags full of crushed cans were piled up further in.

Simply put, it was dead end.

When the girl saw the pile of trash twice her height, she hesitated, but she frantically turned around when she heard my approaching footsteps. Her legs were covered by futuristic boots that rose above the knee and her eyes were covered by colored mobile glasses. She wore a pink hat that looked perfect for an unrealistic police officer costume. Even the heart-shaped paint tattoo below her eye had to be a part of her character. I was in the middle of a criminal investigation, so I didn’t like being the target of those glasses that could switch between recording and transmitting.

For some reason, PSI_ver_RAIN spread her arms and pointed them toward me.

Hm? That’s not quite a sign of surrender???

“S-stay back!”

“I am a police officer. I see no reason to follow your orders.”

“Don’t you know?” Her lips were trembling. “I am PSI_ver_RAIN. I have a special power that can tear apart steel. Take one step closer and you’ll regret it!”

…*Hm…*

I scratched at my head and checked the time on my watch.

“2:10 PM. Suspect confessed to possession of a deadly weapon.”

“Eh? What?”

“Oh, deadly weapons don’t have to be a knife or something. Training in martial arts or a dangerous pet can count too. It’s more about the situation than the physical evidence.”

As I spoke, I reached into my pocket.

When she saw what I pulled out, PSI_ver_RAIN’s pupils grew as large as possible.

“And now that you’ve threatened me with a ‘deadly weapon’, I can respond in kind. For example, pull out my handgun as a warning. You yourself admitted you intend to harm me with a tool capable of killing me.”

“Eh!? Ehhh!? B-but my psychic powers are… Eh? Don’t tell me…you actually believed this farce…”

Over the course of a few seconds she went from wanting me to believe her to wanting me to not believe her.

This is what happens when you use a pathetic bluff to make your getaway.

And so I had decided to settle this in the most ridiculous way possible.

“2:11 PM. Shifting from voluntary questioning to forced arrest. Apprehending the suspect on charges of threatening a police officer and attempted murder. …Turn around and put your hands on your head! Slowly kneel on the ground! Hurry!!”

Part 6 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

A fair number of uniformed police officers would still be on campus to manage the scene of the crime, so I decided to leave PSI_ver_RAIN with one of them.

“I didn’t do it.”

“Then you shouldn’t have run. Back at the voluntary stage, you could have refused my request for a testimony or questioning.”

We spoke to each other as I walked her handcuffed across the campus.

“I had no reason to kill the professor. Just having him attach electrodes to my head was enough to increase the value of my brand name as a psychic middle school girl.”

“We can talk about all that at length.”

“His belt.”

She suddenly said something more interesting.

“His belt was missing, wasn’t it? Look into that and you’ll know I didn’t do it.”

“…? What are you talking-…?”

I trailed off because the Mystery Freak popped out from around the corner of a school building. She waved me over with a uniformed police officer on either side of her.

“Detectiiive, I brought the police.”

“Good job, civilian. This is the first time I’ve felt like praising you.”

One of the police officers gave me a light nod.

“Sorry we’re late, Uchimaku-san. I am Katou and this is Arisaka. Nice to meet you.”

“Hi. This girl is the suspect.”

“Um, can we take over since this area is under our jurisdiction?”

“Of course.”

I gave a light push on PSI_ver_RAIN's back while she was still handcuffed. We had finally taken the first step. A university professor had been found in his locked lab with his torso chopped in two and it was supposedly a psychic murder. No matter who this crime benefited, this girl was almost certainly near the center of it all. Had she killed him or had someone else framed her? Even if it was the latter, anyone who took the time to frame her was probably closely related to her.

But just as I thought that, something came over me.

It was truly just a whim, but I spoke up anyway.

"Katou-san."

"Yes?"

"You can take over if you want, but, well, could I have the handcuffs back? I can always have them sent back at a later date, but then my department chief might take the shipping fee out of my pay."

"You're kidding, aren't you? She's a murder suspect and we're outside. We can't remove her restraints."

"You just have to place your own handcuffs on her and then remove mine."

"…"

"Can't you do it?"

Something I could not quite pinpoint was bubbling up inside me and urging me onward.

"Is there some reason why you can't remove my handcuffs? That would be strange. Unlike a house key, handcuff keys aren't unique. They should open no matter whose key is used. …*Assuming you're really using a handcuff key issued by the Metropolitan Police Department, that is*."

He was quick to react.

The police officer going by the name Katou immediately pulled a revolver from the holster at his waist. But before he could raise his arm, I swung my collapsible baton and hit the back of his hand. As he dropped the gun, I swung the baton back to strike his jaw from the side.

With a solid sound of impact, he fell to the ground.

That left Arisaka. It seemed he hadn't simply been fooled like me. He must have determined PSI_ver_RAIN was too far away because he reached for the closer Mystery Freak. He pulled her close, wrapped an arm around her neck to use her as a shield, and pressed his revolver to the side of her head.

I had already thrown aside the baton and drawn my handgun.

We were three meters apart.

"Put the gun down, Arisaka!!"

“You hand over Amagoi Haruka! Then I’ll release the hostage!!”

Amagoi? Oh, he must mean PSI_ver_RAIN.

“Do you really think I can do that?”

“Then let me tell you something neat. My gun has no rifling, so it doesn’t leave rifling marks on the bullet it fires.”

Arisaka raised the handgun’s hammer with his thumb. Tension raced through my gut, but a moment later, he did something I didn’t expect.

He moved the muzzle away from the Mystery Freak’s head, aimed toward Katou’s head on the ground, and fired.

With a harsh gunshot, the collapsed form gave a large twitch and then never moved again.

“Arisakaaa!!”

“And are you familiar with laser processing technology? It’s the opposite of a 3D printer, so the material is cut away according to a program. That can add any rifling marks you want to a bullet. For example, the rifling marks of the gun you’re holding right now.”

“Why do you want PSI_ver_RAIN that badly?”

“After that gunshot, a crowd is going to gather here before long, Detective Uchimaku. *We are everywhere*. Getting our hands on a bullet submitted by the coroner will be easy.”

“You’re willing to go that far to make this look like a ridiculous psychic murder!?”

“If you don’t like it, then hand over Amagoi Haruka. We’ll leave you alone then! If you don’t want to ruin your life, then make a compromise here!! You worthless government worker!!”

I breathed in and out.

And then I spoke.

“Like hell I’ll do that.”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

“That’s my line. Listen, Arisaka. You’re holding a gun and you have a hostage. You’ve even proven that it’s a real gun. That leaves me with no reason to hesitate.”

“I might be worried if this was Los Angeles, but it’s Japan. You’re going to shoot me in the head in a country where you have to write a report explaining even a warning shot? What if you hit the hostage? Well!?”

“Yeah, if this was a movie, maybe I’d shoot you in the shoulder or skillfully shoot the gun from your hand. But this is reality. People can still move their fingers after being shot in the heart, so I’ll shoot you right through the head to make sure you don’t even make any involuntary movements.”

“Put your gun down, Detective Uchimaku! All you’re going to do is accidentally kill the hostage!”

“This is your final warning, Arisaka. Slowly lower the gun! I don’t want to kill you!!”

“Uchimakuuuu!!”

“Arisakaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

An explosive gunshot seemed to strike my heart.

A fireworks-like smell reached my nose with a hint of a rusty odor.

The man using the Mystery Freak as a shield wobbled to the side. Strength left the arm holding Enbi and a dark red hole had appeared in the center of his forehead.

Like a marionette with its strings cut, Arisaka – no, someone going by that name – collapsed to the ground.

He did not even have a chance to scream.

I put the gun away, approached the collapsed victim, crouched down, and placed my index and middle finger on his neck. “2:20 PM. Suspect is dead.”

“Ah…ahh…ahhhh…”

PSI_ver_RAIN had grown pale and groaned quietly in a sitting position.

Meanwhile, the Mystery Freak rubbed her neck and scarf that had been held.

“You didn’t have to go that far…”

“I was worried about you.”

“Eh? Ah?”

The Mystery Freak grew flustered as I ignored her, crouched down, and gave a heavy sigh. How I would be treated didn’t matter. I hadn’t done anything wrong and something else mattered more.

“I was right. It’s fake.”

I checked through the corpse’s pockets, pulled out the police badge, and checked it over. The ID looked legit at first glance, but it didn’t have the hologram or other counterfeiting countermeasures. And I could only tell because I had a police badge of my own. The average person on the street would never notice.

“The uniforms are the same. Police uniforms are made by famous designers with registered designs to prevent counterfeits. This is like a brand-name bag made in a counterfeiting factory. It looks the same, but something looks off when you take a close look at the stitching.”

“Detective, could you get inside a police station with that?”

“I saw through it at first glance, so not a chance. That talk about getting a bullet from the coroner was a bluff. They aren’t that skilled.”

Even if I got my hands on a school uniform, I would never fit in at a high school. This was the same. Someone from “outside” might be fooled, but anyone on the “inside” would immediately treat them as an outsider.

“I don’t know who they are, but I guess you can ensure Rain-chan’s safety by getting her to a police station.”

“Yeah, but we can’t have someone else do it. Any police officer on the street could be one of them, so we’ll have to do it oursel-…”

I trailed off and closed my mouth.

I had realized something, so I asked.

“Mystery Freak, when you called them here, did you use my name?”

“No. What about it?”

“Both Katou and Arisaka were calling me Detective Uchimaku from the start. They already knew my name and what I was doing.”

I brought a hand to my forehead when I realized the most likely possibility.

“The cellphone. They might be intercepting the signal.”

“Then do you want to put in a dummy SIM card? I’ve got one for emergencies.”

“No.”

I looked to PSI_ver_RAIN who was still sitting on the ground.

“Do you have a cellphone or smartphone other than those mobile glasses?”

“N-no! This thing is convenient, so I can use it for phone calls, emails, and everything…”

“Then let’s swap SIMs.”

“Wait! Then what about you, detective!?”

“Mystery Freak, I’ll trade for your smartphone.”

“Oh, so that’s it. But that’s not fair! You’re taking all the best parts for yourself!”

I didn’t have time to argue.

I could hear footsteps approaching after the two gunshots. Were they students, police officers, or “them”? I pulled the handcuffed PSI_ver_RAIN to her feet by the arm and the Mystery Freak and I turned our backs on each other.

“I’ll prepare a safe line afterwards, so don’t throw away that smartphone.”

“I can’t guarantee your safety anymore. If things get too much for you to handle, get out of here. Understand?”

With that said, we ran off in different directions.

PSI_ver_RAIN looked back several times as we left.

“H-hey! Should you really be leaving them like that!?”

“Of course not! But getting you to safety comes first. I don’t know who’s on our side, so I can’t just throw you into a group of police officers we find walking around!!”

I didn’t have time to explain the situation, so I couldn’t complain if someone misinterpreted this. I would be treated as a police officer who had shot and killed a civilian – even if they were dressed as a police officer and extremely suspicious – and then left the scene without explaining myself or preserving the scene.

And at the same time, I would be an armed fugitive on the run with the top suspect of another murder case.

“For now, we need to get to my home ground. They can’t get in my workplace with their counterfeit equipment. I’ll probably be arrested at the entrance, but don’t worry about that. I’ll explain the misunderstanding and ensure your safety.”

“Y-your workplace?”

“The Metropolitan Police Department.”

Part 7 (Hishigami Enbi)

I made a run for it.

I couldn’t let myself get caught. If one of those “police officers” caught me with no one else around, it could easily end up like that previous situation.

So I chose routes full of people, ran inside a school building, and made my way to the main office.

After slamming the detective’s phone down on the counter, policemen rushed down the corridor from both directions.

“Freeze!!”

“Put your hands on your head!!”

“Wah, wah, wah! What? What is this!? I just came here to drop off a lost phone!!”

I did as I was told and glanced at the police officers surrounding me.

Hm, I can’t tell which ones are real and which ones are fake quite as well as the detective could.

…That means I need to get rid of them all.

I breathed in and shouted loud enough to be heard inside the office.

“Stop!! This phone is an important piece of evidence! I secretly filmed exactly what you were trying to do to me after shoving me into the cop car!! That’s why you want the phone, isn’t it!?”

“Wha-?”

I swung my Suneky scarf around in front of the flustered police officers(?).

“Wahhhhh!! What happened to college autonomy!? All I did was visit for the open campus, so why are a bunch of perverted police officers after me!?”

The door next to the counter burst open.

The usually docile-looking office workers rushed out with fiendish looks on their faces.

“And you call yourselves humaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!?”

“Simply letting you in our school was bad enough, but now this!? It’s the 21st century and you’re still using your authority to act like kings!?”

“Eh? Wha-? No! Wait! I-if you interfere with our work any further…”

“That’s not about to stop us, you horny policemen! Don’t underestimate college autonomy!”

Good, good.

Even now, universities tended to hate interference from the government. If some government workers were strutting about like they owned the place and trying to have their way with some poor girl, the university was going to riot.

My diversion proved effective and the detective and PSI_ver_RAIN had probably escaped at about the same time.

I could have left his phone behind, but I collected it to be nice. I turned it off and removed the SIM to make sure it couldn’t be tracked and then I snuck away from the scuffle.

Now, then.

Unlike the detective, I didn’t have to run around all over the place. I wasn’t good at that either. If I wanted to help them, I needed to hide in one of my secret bases and use the internet for logistical support.

I think the closest one is in Roppongi.

Part 8 (3rd person)

Hachikawa Tomoe and Tsumada Mio lived in neighboring apartments.

Tomoe was an active girl who excelled at sports while Mio would have looked more at home flipping through a book of poetry in a secluded room. Except that was only the impression she gave those around her. While she looked like a Japanese doll with her long hair, her best subject was dance and she could get quite fired up singing all of an idol group’s songs at karaoke. Recently, she had finished mastering the choreography of the famous net idol PSI_ver_RAIN. She just happened not to let anyone see this side of her because she found it embarrassing.

“Who would have thought this would happen?”

It was 2:30 in the afternoon on a weekday, but the two girls were watching TV in an apartment living room. They had eaten lunch a bit ago, but they were already reaching for some cookies.

The TV was still talking about the trains stopped due to signal trouble, warning about the possibility of dirty water coming from the pipes due to problems with the water purification equipment, and everything else that was going wrong.

There had been frequent infrastructure issues lately, but it seemed to have crossed a line today. Their school had cancelled classes for the day because it could not guarantee the safety of the path to school. Those celebrating the day off were bound to fail because, without lessons at school, the students needed to maintain their motivation and study on their own. While realizing there was a good and bad side to everything, Tomoe enjoyed the post-lunch break they were taking.

“It sure is scary outside. I can see why they don’t want us going to school.”

“Yeah, just look at that chaos. I’d lose sight of you right away in that crowd, Mio.”

“Y-you would not.”

Tsumada Mio sat with her legs to the side. She had waist-length black hair and a plain white long-sleeved sailor uniform. Both the black stockings covering her entire legs and the fact that she was wearing her uniform on a day off pointed to her diligence. Her only piece of fashion was the hairclips on her bangs.

She had been placed at the center of an incident involving a Jinmensou.

After being exposed to one hundred, one thousand, or even more Jinmensou – which were symbols of lies – her presence would fade to the very limit.

Even so, she had returned to her normal life.

And it was all thanks to the detective who had arrested the despicable man who had killed Tomoe’s real father and tried to take her best friend from her.

“Tomoe-chan, what are you going to put on that form?”

“Oh, the one for what I want to be when I grow up? Honestly, can’t they wait until we’re third years? It’s as embarrassing as an essay in elementary school, so my hand stops whenever I try to write something.”

“Eh heh heh. You’re going to be a police officer, aren’t you?”

“Wha-!? Wait! I never said that!! And you don’t get to decide what I’ll be!!”

As they were arguing, the image on the TV suddenly changed.

“We will be interrupting this program for some breaking news.”

“?”

There had not been any proper program playing in the first place. It had been nothing but information about the stopped electricity or water. The girls’ apartment

complex had been miraculously spared those inconveniences, though. At any rate, this breaking news had to be something with even more impact.

As they looked to the screen with that in mind, the announcer read off the news.

“At just past two this afternoon, there was a shooter at Minato’s Private Keijou Ijuku University. The suspect is Uchimaku Hayabusa. He is a detective with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department’s Investigation Division 1, so he is carrying a handgun and is on the run along with the suspect of a different murder. The suspect has shot and killed one victim and his connection to another body found nearby is under investigation. If any nearby residents see him, please do not approach him. I repeat, at just past two this afternoon…”

They did not understand.

It may have been from his driver’s license, but a picture of his face was displayed next to the announcer. It looked eerily unhealthy and seemed horribly wrong to anyone who knew him.

What was this?

What had happened?

Tomoe’s mouth flapped opened and closed as she wondered those things and she finally turned toward her best friend.

“…Huh? Mio???”

At first, she thought Tsumada Mio’s “presence” had vanished again.

But that was not the case. Not even Hachikawa Tomoe knew the exact rules or conditions, but Mio only ever vanished in a group of people. She doubted the girl would vanish this easily when they were alone together.

So was she really gone?

But where had she gone?

“Mio!!”

Part 9 (Jinnai Shinobu)

After the cooking lesson in home ec, math class began while the food weighed heavily on my stomach. Surprisingly, having your stomach this full actually kept you from feeling sleepy.

In the next seat over, Akechi-kun had his forehead pressed to his desk, but that wasn’t because he was sleepy. It had more to do with the ridiculous amount of the pork and ginger meal (Nagisa’s love-filled special recipe) he had eaten. It was a mixture of pain, resignation, and (for some reason) ecstasy. The food had gone in through his mouth, but he had the face of a guy who had taken it up the ass. The fool hadn’t learned to empty his mind when eating Nagisa’s cooking. The flavor alone was perfect, but thinking about what was inside it would kill your heart. He had just taken another step toward adulthood.

An unrestrained knock came to the classroom door.

When all of the bored students looked over, the door opened and our nervous homeroom teacher poked her head in.

“U-u-um… Is Jinnai-kun in here? Could I have him come with me for a moment?”

Tarou and the Love King were the first to react.

“Jinnai… Has your love life finally gotten to the point that even our teacher is calling you out?”

“I’ve heard he’s been visiting the upperclassmen’s third floor zone lately.”

“Shut up! That rumor about the student council room being used for supplementary lessons in love is a complete lie! That scary student council president is just forcing odd jobs onto me, dammit!!”

As we argued, I did as our homeroom teacher said. But this was indeed odd. I couldn’t imagine why she would be calling me out. My best guess was it had to do with Madoka or Nagisa rather than me directly.

As soon as I stepped out into the hall, our homeroom teacher held up the tablet computer she used to keep roll. She used it as shield so we could speak in private. This naturally meant she moved her face in close.

“U-um, this is a first for me, so I’m, uh, not really sure how to handle it…”

“Smoooooch.”

“Why are you trying to kiss me all of a sudden, Jinnai-kun!?”

Tch. I tried to disguise it, but she’s surprisingly clever. I was so close, but I was missing something. I need to research this some more.

“So what exactly do you want to talk about? If it’s about the destroyed elementary school during that Oomukade business, I thought I already explained how that was a misunderstanding.”

“W-well, we’ll discuss this more in the student guidance room, but can you look at this first to get you up to speed?”

I didn’t like the sound of discussing something in the student guidance room, but she didn’t seem all that angry. Wondering what this could possibly be, I watched on as she held out her tablet.

It was displaying a news program a TV station was transmitting as streaming video.

“I repeat, the suspect is on the run with a fourteen-year-old girl who goes by the name PSI_ver_RAIN and who is the suspect in another murder case. His name is Uchimaku Hayabusa and he is a detective with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department’s Investigation Division 1. He is carrying a handgun and he has killed at least one person at Private Keijou Ijuku University. He is considered extremely dangerous. If any nearby residents happen to see him, do not approach him for any reason.”

“You’re kidding…”

“U-um, it seems to be real. I doubt there will be an immediate panic thanks to the name difference between Jinnai and Uchimaku, but the students are bound to find out before long. So if you want to leave school early, I’ll help you out and secretly-…”

“You’re kidding!? My uncle’s going on a survival date in the big city with Rain-chan!? C’mon, give me a turn! Can he just do whatever he wants!?”

“That’s what you’re interested in!?”

Well, what else would I be interested in? That uncle was the kind of incarnation of justice you only saw in dramas. He wouldn’t kill someone without a good reason.

And it was even more obvious when he was on the run with Rain-chan who was the suspect in another murder case.

Part 10 (Hishigami Enbi)

You might not guess it, but I was part of the so-called Hills Tribe.

And so there I was stepping inside a room in a high-rise Roppongi apartment. I switched on the desktop computer and pulled out a headset for an internet phone. I quickly secured a line with my information source.

But that information source was not just a single expert.

There were plenty of people who heard all sorts of daily conversations as background noise: people handing out fliers, taxi drivers, waitresses, etc. And sometimes those people wanted to work for the good of the world but didn’t know how.

So I connected them together and gave them a place to speak together.

Each individual one was an extremely small online community that gathered people from a similar genre. But when I aggregated and managed the data there, it became a massive monitoring system for all sorts of data. This was how I had so much police and hospital information. I had plenty of helpers such as vending machine workers or cleaning ladies.

“Phew…”

I couldn’t get my brain up and running without my usual smartphone with me. It was really convenient for taking handwritten memos and organizing information. Feeling empty-handed, I started squeezing the face of my Suneky scarf.

At any rate, I mentally went over what I wanted to ask about.

Next, I had to determine the most effective person to ask those questions.

Part 11 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I had removed PSI_ver_RAIN aka Amagoi Haruka’s handcuffs and we walked through the city. A look at the TVs in an electronics store show window was enough for me to be feeling quite blue.

Wow, I really look like a villain there!!

Of course, I wasn't a super policeman running through the city to clear the nonsensical charges disgracing his name. I had in fact killed the person they were accusing me of killing.

"Sh-should we really be wandering around the city like this? We live in a world where one hundred million people have cellphones. And if you have a camera, you can transmit the footage right away. So…"

"There are more people on the streets than normal due to the train signal trouble and related traffic jams. We can hide behind the wall of people. And the police are busy managing traffic, so they don't have the manpower needed for human wave tactics."

"Y-you mean if someone started looting, the police wouldn't be able to chase after them?"

"That's a secret. It would cause a panic if that got out."

Her distinctive sailor uniform and paint tattoo below the eye weren't that rare a sight near a university during cultural festival season. And the best way of getting past police checkpoints was to move on foot. Or rather, Japan's police checkpoints were primarily meant to block off the roads. As long as we didn't approach any major transportation facilities like train stations or airports, we wouldn't be caught if we walked around without doing anything too suspicious.

"For now, let's get to the Metropolitan Police Department. We're in Minato, so Sakuradamon isn't far. It should only take ten minutes even on foot."

"W-wait! But isn't that right next to the Imperial Palace and the Diet? Aren't we trying to run away from the police!?"

"Real police officers aren't a problem. And 'they' won't want to get close to anywhere with strict security. We can assume that the greater the security, the more allies we have around. Isn't that right?"

Of course, that was only if PSI_ver_RAIN really hadn't chopped Professor Matsukai in two.

"To make sure there are no misunderstandings, let me make it clear I'm not completely on your side. I'm protecting you because you were in danger, but that doesn't mean you aren't a suspect."

"…Sigh."

The psychic middle school girl let out a heavy sigh.

Then she removed her mobile glasses.

"I get the feeling we're going to be together for a while, so it might be a good idea to share what information I have."

"What's this?"

“These are mobile glasses. Basically, they’re a smartphone shaped like glasses. They can access the internet, make calls, and record both audio and video. …Seeing things from my viewpoint would be faster than having me explain it.”

“You mean you recorded when you found the body!?”

I quickly grabbed the mobile glasses and put them on. I wasn’t used to them, so I followed PSI_ver_RAIN’s instructions to start playing the video.

At first, it was footage of her walking through a university staircase.

Unlike a normal camera, it wobbled a lot from the movements of her head and eyes, so I had to focus my mind to avoid motion sickness.

“I mentioned the professor’s belt earlier, remember?” she asked from the side.

The footage moved from the stairs to the hallway. It approached one of the doors and a hand knocked, but the hand suddenly stopped. She must have expected a solid sensation, but the door creaked open instead.

“That belt – well, actually the buckle – was a strange type of USB memory. He didn’t trust the defenses of online or cloud storage, so he liked to keep the data on him in a way that couldn’t be pickpocketed or snatched away by a thief.”

The past footage of the girl called “professor” through the cracked door.

Finding this odd, she placed a hand on the door and slowly opened it. Inside, she found the elderly man lying on his back. His right side was dyed in red, but it looked more like a stab wound than a bisection.

…No, wait. Does this mean…?

“When you found him, the door wasn’t locked. And the body still wasn’t chopped in two?”

“There’s more. Pause it and rewind. Look more carefully at the body this time.”

“…?”

I did so and realized what she was getting at.

Several wounds were cut into him below his navel and just to the left of his belt buckle.

“To prevent theft, the belt buckle wouldn’t open without a code. It was like a chastity belt or something. But thanks to that, the murderer panicked. They wanted to get the buckle’s USB memory no matter what, so they initially tried to cut the belt itself, but…”

“They couldn’t do it with the blade they had on hand?”

“The professor bragged about that belt. It was made of carbon something-or-other which apparently makes it harder than diamond but still flexible.”

The footage on the screen, rushed into the room, crouched down by the professor, and called out to him again and again. She didn't grab his shoulders and shake him, but she may have been afraid of making him bleed any further.

Finally, the footage turned around as if she had noticed something.

"But the murderer didn't give up. They wanted to get the buckle no matter what. If they couldn't cut the belt, what else could they cut through? And what would they need to do so? If they had only left to find that, they were sure to return. And with an even more brutal tool. So what would have happened to me if they ran across me?"

That was the truth of the bisected corpse.

Someone had cut through the torso to steal the belt filled with research data.

"So that's why you fled…"

"But the guilt won out in the end. I turned back toward the lab to help with the investigation, but then all the policemen and students were talking about a bisected corpse, a psychic murder, and that I supposedly did it. I had no idea what to think."

I removed the mobile glasses.

PSI_ver_RAIN quietly bit her lip.

"It started as a way to get my name out there. And it probably was for him too. We both wanted to make an impact."

Those mobile glasses held the final moment of someone who was gone and she held them to her chest like a funeral portrait.

"But he wasn't a bad person. He was certainly eccentric, but no matter how ridiculous a thing it was, he wouldn't laugh and drive you out. He would seriously investigate it all. He would actually work with you…"

"That's an important piece of evidence. We need to get it to the police as soon as possible."

"Who's going to believe it? Digital data is easily modified and I'm known for working on the internet anyway. It's all over if they call it fake."

I had no response for that.

I tried to say something, but I couldn't find any words and then I heard a phone ringing.

It was the smartphone the Mystery Freak had given me.

"What is it?"

"I have some good news and some bad news. I'll start with the good news. Detective, what's the first place you would want to investigate concerning all this?"

With Professor Matsukai, the fake police officers, and PSI_ver_RAIN herself, there were a lot of candidates, but my mind turned to the most unusual one which was not covered in police officers.

“The prosecutors and the courthouse. For one, how did the thesis on psychic murders get submitted as having scientific basis?”

“Bingo. I thought the same thing and looked into it. That thesis was forced through by the assigned prosecutor, Uzuki Minato. …But doesn’t that seem odd?”

“The suspect hasn’t even been arrested or indicted, but there’s already a prosecutor?”

“They were setting this up to frame Rain-chan in advance. I tried calling up the prosecution office to tell them there was some falsified data in that thesis and its credibility would drop like a rock if that got out. That would ruin their plans and their partner would probably punish them for it, so I was going to ask for some money to keep quiet.”

Hold on. Should you really be telling me that?

The Mystery Freak ignored my thoughts and continued.

“But that gets to the bad news. Uzuki Minato hasn’t returned to the office since leaving for lunch. He didn’t have any plans for working out of the office and his phone is off. I couldn’t catch him.”

“When was the thesis in question submitted?”

“1:30 PM. That’s right after the murder. It’s possible he vanished as soon as the submission was accepted at the courthouse.”

Once his role was complete, had they eliminated him or were at least trying to?

“Did you call his home?”

“I did. No response.”

“I’ll head there. Tell me where it is.”

I hung up and PSI_ver_RAIN looked puzzled.

“Head there? Head where? Why!? Aren’t we on the way to the Metropolitan Police Department to protect me from whoever killed the professor!?”

“Sorry. All I can do is apologize.”

I obediently bowed my head,

That seemed to catch her off guard, but I didn’t have time to worry about it.

“But Uzuki Minato, a prosecutor who seems to be involved in this, is in danger just like you. I can’t put one life above another. I can’t call in backup like normal, so I have to head there on my own. I know this is selfish, but will you go with me?”

“…”

She averted her gaze, toyed with her hair, and finally gave a long sigh of resignation.

“Fine! Then let’s go. But this ends with checking to see whether this Uzuki person is alive or dead. You need to get me to the Metropolitan Police Department as soon as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“This isn’t worth thanking me for. The situation is just making it really difficult to do what should be normal.”

With a change of plans, we started toward Uzuki Minato’s home.

If he was there, that was fine. If not, we might find a clue to where he was hiding.

Part 12 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Uzuki Minato’s home was located on reclaimed land bordering the bay. The area had originally been planned as a district of high-class apartment buildings, but the plan was halted when soil liquefaction was discovered. From there, it transformed into an incredibly cheap area of land in the city center due to unfortunate circumstances.

I rang the doorbell but received no response.

I slipped through the small gate and grabbed the knob, discovering the door was not locked.

“…”

PSI_ver_RAIN and I exchanged a glance and I slowly opened the door. I wasn’t sure what to do inside, but I decided to remove my shoes and continue on in. It took some doing for PSI_ver_RAIN to remove her boots and she even politely removed her hat, but she kept the mobile glasses on.

I walked down the hallway, opened the first door, and found a living room.

A young man was collapsed face-up in the center of the room.

“Uzuki-san!? Dammit!!”

I ran over and grabbed his shoulders, but he was just an object now. Shifting his position allowed blood to pool up by his side.

Were “they” faster!?

And…

“Kyah!?”

This time, PSI_ver_RAIN cried out behind me.

My mind turned to my handgun as I turned around, but I only found the girl there and she was messing with her mobile glasses for some reason.

“What is it?”

“Eh? Um, uh, my mobile glasses are acting up for some reason.”

We had discovered a corpse and our electronics weren't working. It sounded like a scene from a horror movie.

As that thought reached me, the door to the dining room casually opened.

A young woman in a tank top and hot pants poked her head out with a sake bottle in one hand.

"Hishigami…Mai!?"

"Okay, okay. I used remote control to take over those glasses of yours. For people like us, nothing could be more troublesome than those things. To be honest, going around recording everything is like asking to be killed."

Mai seemed perfectly carefree despite the corpse in the room.

"And if you're going to come in here, couldn't you at least wear gloves? Well, I was about to erase the evidence with some alcohol, so I'll help you out if you tell me what you touched. Was it only the corpse and the doorknob? Anything else?"

"Erase…the evidence? Are you saying you did this!?"

"Don't insult me. I was going to clean up the floor because the Sunekosuri pissed himself quite spectacularly when he saw the corpse. He's out in the yard doing some soul-searching, so you can go say hi if you want."

What was this woman doing in the PSI_ver_RAIN incident?

When she was involved, it went beyond simple crimes and nearly reached the level of a war.

"You aren't wrong to think that way."

Mai seemed to have read my mind.

"I'm not the one getting involved where I don't belong. You're the ones doing that. … So how much do you know about this incident? Do you know what was on the belt buckle's USB memory? Do you know who's after it? In fact, do you even know who Professor Matsukai Hiroshi was?"

"What? What do you mean who he was?"

Mai was always several steps ahead of us, but that final question seemed different to me. We had never even thought about it like that.

"Wait, really? It didn't come back to you the second you heard the fake name Matsukai Hiroshi? When we were caught in the Hyakki Yakou coup d'etat in that red brick hotel up north, every member of Saishi Kajin used that name. It's the fake name used by the people who slaughtered the hotel's workers and took their place."

"Wait. You don't mean…"

"Oh, it isn't Saishi Kajin themselves. That's a free fake name that anyone can use. But there's definitely an organization on an equal level involved in this. That means this was in my territory from the beginning. Understand now?"

This was no laughing matter and I couldn't understand any of it.

If this really was part of Mai's world, then how did we get involved? What landmine had we unwittingly stepped on?

"That professor was a member of a certain team."

"A team?"

"The one the Aoandon is gathering. And the buckle contained the program used to activate a Package including the Aoandon herself."

Professor Matsukai's original field of study was information engineering. The psychic powers research was supposedly only a performance meant to get him on TV, make a name for himself, and get funding.

"So someone stole that from him?"

"Now you're getting it. And of course, it wouldn't have been someone with the Aoandon. This is probably a close competition between the Aoandon's group and another group trying to crush it."

For the group stealing the professor's buckle, the torso bisection had been a deviation from the plan.

Simply stabbing him and swiping the buckle could be passed off as a random industrial spy, but their method had been far too grotesque. It was impossible to ignore now, so they were making it look like a sensational psychic murder as if covering food with mayonnaise to hide the original flavor.

So who was it we were after here?

Who was this enemy of the Aoandon?

"Who are 'they'? How can I clear PSI_ver_RAIN…no, Amagoi-san's name!?"

"At least you have enough sense not to try to take on the Aoandon at the base of all this. Of course, that's my job. They're known as Konrin Naraku. They're one of the lowest level organizations out there. Or rather, they intentionally gather a ton of low-level firepower. If you think of Hyakki Yakou as a top-class restaurant, then Konrin Naraku is the king of fast food."

"…?"

"Basically, they're all expendable. They recruit people dealing with debt, abuse, a stalker, trouble with a *large criminal organization*, or some other problem. Then they take care of that problem for the person in exchange for doing a job that will land them in jail. They're not expecting to return safely and getting arrested is a part of their plan from the beginning. Then again, I hear some of them are asked to give their lives in exchange for saving their families."

It all started to make sense.

When I had revealed Katou and Arisaka as fake policemen, one had shot the other and then made a hopeless threat that got him shot by me.

He hadn’t been trying to win. He may have been using the Mystery Freak as a way to commit suicide.

“But Konrin Naraku is an entirely mercenary group, so they wouldn’t go and kill someone for their own principles. That means someone else has hired them to stop the Aoandon’s group and they’re using you as a part of that plan.”

“Who is that?”

“You’ll wish you hadn’t asked, officer.”

“Either way, I’ve already made an enemy of whoever it is. There’s no two ways around it in this situation, so tell me. Who in the world is it!?”

Mai slowly exhaled and then spoke.

“What do you think the Aoandon is after anyway?”

“Stop beating around the bu-…”

“The answer is Nagatacho.”

That word seemed to squeeze at my heart.

My mouth flapped opened and closed without a word escaping, so Mai continued.

“More accurately, Nagatacho Station. You’ve heard the rumors, right? Supposedly, there’s a largescale nuclear shelter for the Diet members and bureaucrats hidden below that subway station since it’s so close to the Diet building. Even if their diplomatic strategy fails and nuclear war begins, the very ones who started it can live on in peace without taking any kind of responsibility.”

“…”

“But do you really think it’s just a nuclear shelter hidden there? The younger Diet members seem to believe that, but it isn’t true. That isn’t some puny little facility meant to protect the easily replaceable Diet members that pretty much just won a popularity contest.”

In other words, our enemy was…

“It’s someone who doesn’t want the Aoandon to open that door,” said Mai. “It’s one of the few VIPs who know the truth about Nagatacho Station that not even the cabinet ministers know about. That’s the target you need to bring down.”

Part 13 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

I felt my vision shaking.

The Diet? The cabinet ministers? Someone even higher? One of the few VIPs who know the truth about Nagatacho Station?

The more she described our enemy, the less clear a picture I had of them. That was how deep they were. It was like chasing after a monster from an urban legend.

Was there really anything we could do?

But even as a mixture of doubt and fear came over me, time was passing.

This time, the Mystery Freak's smartphone rang.

"I'm relaying a call, detective. I answered because someone called your number, but I can transfer them to you if you want. Should I?"

"Who is it?"

"Mishima Jun. That's the Chief Superintendent of the National Police Agency. Including the director of the agency, there are only about two posts above him."

Him!?

I clenched my teeth and sweat poured down my face, but there was only one answer I could give.

"Transfer him over."

"Will do. But detective, be careful here. This is on a different level from before."

After a small click, the line was switched to someone else.

This new person spoke in a gentle voice.

"Hi, Uchimaku-kun, how much do you know?"

"What in the world is hidden in the depths of Nagatacho Station?"

"Well done. We can't discuss this on the phone, so could we meet in person somewhere?"

"…"

"Yes, you should be cautious, but if you don't agree to this, I'm pretty sure you'll find yourself at a dead end. You want any new information you can get your hands on, right?"

He was exactly right, so I could only agree to his request.

After deciding on the specifics of our meeting, I asked a question that suddenly came to me.

"Why are you giving me a hint?"

"I've told you before that I have high hopes for you, haven't I?"

He hung up there.

PSI_ver_RAIN looked like she wanted to say something, but I held up my index finger to stop her.

"I'm going alone this time. This is too dangerous for you."

“That’s right, detective. You’re about to meet a VIP from the NPA. And surely you know he’s not about to meet an armed fugitive without some bodyguards, right? If you run out there without thinking, those guards in black suits will end up capturing you.”

“I have an idea about that.”

“What kind of idea?”

“I’m going to stop by a supermarket or department store on the way. I’ll get everything I need there.”

Part 14 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

You were only going to get run-of-the-mill flavor from a major chain café, but this one was full of customers today. The trains were stopped due to signal trouble and the roads were congested, so everyone was traveling by foot and thus quite thirsty. The inside of the café and the open space outside were both overflowing with people.

Inside, I killed time sitting at one of the few round tables.

By the time I had finished half of my large-sized iced coffee, someone sat at the next table over. We were sitting back to back and the other person began speaking quietly.

“Hi, Uchimaku-kun. Long time no see.”

“…Mishima-san.”

“Yeah, don’t turn around. That would ruin the entire setup.”

I used my smartphone screen as a mirror to see Mishima pretending to read an English newspaper.

“Now, then. Where should I begin?”

“How about the secret of Nagatacho Station and the people who don’t want that door opened?”

“Okay. It would be over too quick if I started out with the conclusion.”

He answered like it was no big deal.

“Remember what happened at the special casino district called Goldmine Island? I’m not sure how much of the information made it to you, but that was all centered on a national suicide Package that used an Usuhiki Warashi. But that was only one thing Nagatacho Station does.”

“…?”

“The true reason for that shelter is to store a secret server that automatically backs up all of the classified data stored in each ministry, government office, and research institute. The bureaucrats and officials don’t even know it exists or that every word they type is being sent outside of their building. They voluntarily share their

information, but sometimes someone wants to hide some key data and that would make it all meaningless.”

“You mean all of Japan is hidden there?”

“When we suffered a critical defeat in the precision machinery industry, we managed to recover using extreme high quality brand-name agriculture. All of the technology used to do that is stored in the server. And not only is that server’s existence one of those specially designated secret that are all the rage lately, but it’s also secretly designated a strategic cultural property.”

“A strategic cultural property?”

“That’s a new clause in the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. It was secretly added using the specially designated secret system. The framework is meant to protect the traditional culture at the foundation of our national economy. That is, the artisan techniques and agriculture of Intellectual Villages or anything else we don’t want leaking out to other nations. And the classification means all the submitted documents would be blotted out with a black pen even if this did cause a scandal.”

“Specially designated secrets and strategic cultural properties? Don’t those conflict with each other?”

“It’s made that way on purpose to blur the lines of jurisdiction. Even if someone submits a proper disclosure request, it’ll just get passed on to someone else forever and nothing will ever come of it.”

The Aoandon’s group was trying to force open that door.

What were they hoping to accomplish?

“With power, gas, and everything else, there’s been a ton of infrastructure damage lately, right? They’re all unrelated incidents and accidents, but look at them all together and it looks like the Japanese Archipelago’s arteries are hardening.”

“Y-yes. There was even a blackout when I was capturing the culprit behind the Ubasute Apartments case.”

“That’s part of the Aoandon’s show. Nagatacho Station has several security levels and this infrastructure damage has caused that to shoot up by a few levels.”

“Hm? Doesn’t that just make the place more secure?”

“There was a vulnerability in the process of switching to the highest security level. The process is only used once a century, so it didn’t seem like that big a deal. There were countless warnings, but it seems the defense contractors are all colluding together and it never got fixed. The politicians are only starting to panic now, but you can’t fix such a largescale system in a few days. This is exactly what the Aoandon wanted.”

While he didn’t say this was checkmate, he sounded like he was watching everything on the game board falling apart after someone made a pointless move. The Aoandon’s plan had to be underway.

But what was that plan? Who would want to stop it?

“The Public Security Intelligence Agency had been investigating that professor, Matsukai Hiroshi. Although they were close to giving up since he was so obsessed with the occult. Still, they managed to intercept a few fragments of information. About the program he was building, for example.”

“The one in his belt buckle?”

“The Aoandon is a collection of one hundred ghost stories…that is, rumors. She herself is a giant information system. It seems that professor was working on a program to efficiently search through that information system. Of course, we only know that from the restored fragment of a corrupted email.”

“So it’s a search program that amplifies the Aoandon’s power?”

“No, that doesn’t quite cover it.”

Mishima rejected my idea but did not stop there.

“It would be more accurate to say it links the Aoandon to Nagatacho Station. Everything is located there: Japan’s technology, Japan’s systems, Japan’s dirty secrets…everything. You could say the Aoandon Package is a criminal system meant to expose Japan.”

“…”

“The restaurant politics, dirty money, collusion, kickbacks, illegal donations, cover ups, voter fraud, paid silence, and control of the media. There are plenty of terms you’ve heard but don’t know exactly what they refer to, right? All of that will be revealed, translated into words a child could understand, and left in a place where anyone can read it,” said Mishima. “Such an obvious bomb, isn’t it? Once its existence is exposed, everyone will try to set it off. This age is oppressive and everyone wants entertainment. But not many of the people are going to be smart enough to realize that they’ll be caught in the blast once it blows. They think they can just separate the politicians from the normal people. They’ve been taught to think that way, after all. They naively believe nothing they see on TV can reach them.”

He may have had a point there.

People always innocently insulted the politicians and carelessly blamed them for anything they could. But when this country’s bubble burst or when the precision machinery industry suffered its “critical defeat”, had those people realized the politicians’ failure would end up destroying their own lifestyle and way of thinking?

“But that’s only getting your just deserts. It only harms the people who did something they don’t want anyone to know about. That’s no reason to sacrifice PSI_ver_...Amagoi Haruka-san.”

“I agree completely. But the political pressure has reached me now. They don’t care if it means making this a psychic murder. They just want us to arrest the scapegoat or even to shoot her if a trial would be too difficult. They managed to help Japan by stealing the buckle from the Aoandon’s group, but then they created more doubt with the torso bisection which will lead to a scandal in and of itself. …I had to avoid mentioning some things here or there, but that should give you a general idea of the situation.”

“…”

“You don’t have to give off that scary aura. I’m going to tell you, I promise. It’s Katagiri Hitsuji. He’s part of what’s known as the Restaurant Master. The rumors are even more well-known than the ones about Nagatacho Station, so I’m sure you’ve heard them. The ones about a don controlling all politics from inside a fancy restaurant. He’s part of that. I know it sounds as fake as the Kuchisake Onna, but it actually exists.”

“The Restaurant…Master?”

“Katagiri Hitsuji has a lot of influence over the cutting-edge agricultural centered on the Intellectual Villages. And interestingly enough, he controlled the precision machinery industry before its critical defeat.”

He suppressed a laugh and continued in an icy voice.

“This is really only a rumor, but some say he helped push things from industry to agriculture during the transitional period. To make sure the industrial makers didn’t put up too much of a fight, he finished them off by accessing their design data in the patent office and sending it overseas while disguising it as an accidental leak. If that story was substantiated by any actual evidence, it would be far more than just a scandal. Requests for damages in the trillions of yen would be flying all over the place. His glory days would quickly come to an end. Not to mention that the Restaurant Master controls everything from the shadows. Well, you can find some details on that power structure by doing a search for ‘Panopticon’ or ‘The Birth of the Prison’. At any rate, it’s all over for everyone connected to the Restaurant once their identities are exposed to the media.”

Unlike a king or president, they did not rule from center stage. In fact, they hid their presence as much as possible so they could observe the people without any chance of being attacked.

Someone like that could never come out onto the stage. They would influence that field, but they would never actually appear there.

But what if you could drag them up onto that field?

Or…

“Now, that’s about all I have to tell you.”

“That doesn’t mean this is over though, does it?”

“At least you understand.”

We had our backs to each other, but Mishima seemed to be smiling.

“I want you to leave all of this alone. Just hand Amagoi Haruka over to us. Could you do that maybe?”

“I have no reason to.”

“You may be in Department 1, but it’s a dead-end job as a police sergeant. And you didn’t end up there because it was your first choice, right? You had to have ended up there after coming across and overcoming a number of setbacks. So what’s wrong

with one more setback here? This is your chance to turn your life toward strategic failure or strategic success. You ended up where you are by giving up on something, but this will be enough to make you glad it ended up this way. So can't you just do this one thing?"

I closed my eyes just once.

A number of things appeared in my mind's eye, but then I forced my eyelids open and spoke.

"There is no way I can do that."

Silence followed.

I was well aware I had thrown down the gauntlet against someone far, far above me.

An oppressive wave of noise seemed to assault my ears.

It was nothing but the hustle and bustle of the people moving around us, but I was so focused on my conversation with Mishima that I couldn't split it into individual voices.

"It's true my life has been full of setbacks and failures. For one thing, the main reason I left my rural home was my fear of Youkai. My parents paid my way through college, but I ended up failing the national exam and couldn't get anything but a dead-end job. I'm doing my best in Department 1, but I'm not entirely confident this is even the best job for me."

But…

"Still, I only managed to get this far because I worked hard to never leave the path I had set for myself. No matter how pitiful or pathetic it might be, I've always had a line I refuse to cross. And that's why your path and mine will never, ever intersect. No matter what reason you might have, I can never allow myself to happily abandon a middle school girl suspected of murder just to protect myself."

Mishima cut in with no discernable emotion in his voice.

"Even if that means destroying your own life?"

"I know I'm being idealistic and I know this is naïve nonsense I shouldn't be saying at my age!! But I'm a police officer. If the police can't be idealistic, then who in this country can!? How many people do you think there are that want to be but can't!?"

That was the kind of job this was.

Everyone wanted to rescue the victim being targeted by a criminal with a knife. They wanted to interfere and stop it themselves. But that wasn't realistic, so they left it to someone else. They passed off the job and silently begged for someone to bring back their peaceful days or to protect the victim's smile. And that was our job. Fulfilling that role was the job of a police officer.

So what was this?

We're supposed to give in to pressure from some VIP abusing his power, arrest a minor girl who we know is a scapegoat, force a confession through a questioning

that’s basically torture, use a rigged trial to force the ridiculous crime of psychic murder on her, and throw her behind bars? That’s supposed to be a job well done where everyone lives happily ever after?

Whose tax money did these people think their pay came from?

It wasn’t that they’d done everything they could and it wasn’t quite enough.

If you aren’t willing to put in the work from the get-go, then why call yourself a police officer at all?

“Is there any chance at all of you leaving this alone?”

“Hell no.”

“Well, that’s a problem,” muttered Mishima.

But something seemed strangely off about it. His voice contained a nuance of slight enjoyment that did not fit his position or what he was saying.

And over the phone, he had said he had high hopes for me. Which side had he “hoped” I would go for? And if he only had to arrest me, this entire chat would have been meaningless. He could have done it the instant I showed myself here.

Despite the situation, I turned around to see the look in his eyes, but before I could, he calmly snapped his fingers.

“Then it’s time for a change of plans. I’ll have to arrest you.”

Kh!! So we’re doing that, are we!?

I grabbed what was sitting on my lap and thus hidden below the table and I looked around the area. About ten bodyguards were so clearly visible I was amazed I hadn’t noticed them before and they were rushing toward me.

But I was faster.

I pulled out a plastic bag of red liquid, stabbed a ballpoint pen into it, and threw it under the table. The bag contained fish blood I’d bought at a supermarket, but it would have enough of the rusty smell I wanted.

As the odor wafted out, I raised my voice.

“He’s got a knife!! And he stabbed someone! Run! Hurry!!”

The people nearby looked over in confusion at first, but once the rusty smell reached their noses and mouths, a clearer image filled their minds.

A wave of people pressed outwards in every direction.

As numbed by peace as the country was, we were sensitive to stabbings. Just like the United States with mass shootings or South America with drugs. That fear had soaked into us for centuries. As screams and shouts of anger filled the air, I slowly stood up and followed the flow of people. The tough-looking bodyguards could not fight the current and they couldn’t pull out their guns and fire randomly for fear of hitting innocent bystanders. Meanwhile, I blended into the crowd.

Mishima waved goodbye without getting up from his seat. He wasn't even looking my way, but I could somehow tell this was exactly what he had wanted to happen.

At any rate, I had the information I wanted.

I needed to leave the area, meet back up with PSI_ver_RAIN, and make my next move.

But then a bodyguard in a black suit appeared right in front of me.

"!?"

"!!"

He had not been lying in wait and he looked as surprised as me. He had probably been pushed out in front of me by the moving crowd, but he was pursuing me regardless. I tensed up and he drew his handgun of all things.

You drew your gun because you're panicking!? How many civilians do you think there are around here!?

A weight pressed down on my stomach.

And a moment later…

Part 15 (3rd person)

The bodyguard lost sight of the suspect who had been right in front of him.

"Eh? What?"

The crowd was moving by on either side, but Uchimaku Hayabusa alone was nowhere to be seen.

He heard a colleague's voice over the headset on his ear.

"Did you find him?"

"I lost sight of him. But I was sure he was right there!"

And…

Uchimaku Hayabusa stood just a few meters in front of him. He had not taken a step from his previous position. Even with the wall of people, the bodyguard should have spotted him immediately, but there was a reason why he had not.

That reason was a girl.

Tsumada Mio had wrapped her arms around his waist from behind.

As a side effect of the Jinmensou, that girl's presence had thinned.

Whenever three or more people were gathered, herself included, she would often become indistinguishable from others, as if her face had vanished.

“(Over here.)”

Uchimaku was confused, but the two of them started moving as one. Fleeing people ran into them left and right. It happened far too often. It was like those people could not see them and therefore could not even try to avoid them.

After escaping the surrounding bodyguards and entering a nearby alleyway, Tsumada Mio removed her arms from Uchimaku’s waist.

“Long time no see. Are you okay?”

“Tsumada…-san?”

“That’s right. It’s Tsumada Mio.”

She had waist-length straight black hair and a white long-sleeved sailor uniform. Her slender legs were entirely covered in black stockings and she looked somewhat gloomy, but that impression was entirely overturned once one actually spoke with her. She was nothing but a normal teenage girl.

“Tomoe-chan looked sad when she saw the news on TV, so I ended up doing something reckless. Oh, but I got Enbi-san’s help setting it all up. I had Tomoe-chan tell me how to contact her via computer a while back. She apparently lets people consult with her. Did you know that?”

“She’s getting civilians involved for her own convenience again, isn’t she!?”

“I hate that framework.”

Hayabusa held his head in his hands, but Mio puffed her cheeks out in protest.

“Tomoe-chan is too of course, but Enbi-san is a normal girl. As am I. If we know you’re in trouble, we want to use everything we can to help. I think you should, well, rely more on things that are against the rules. Your insistence on the rules looks kind at first, but it’s actually horribly cruel. Did you know that?”

“…”

It was true Tsumada Mio’s power was convenient and the Mystery Freak’s smarts could come in handy.

But what if it failed? If they had not fooled that bodyguard, she might have been shot along with him.

“We wonder those same things. After all, we’re not just characters given the symbols of a middle school girl. We’re human beings who can be trapped by fear when we’re worried about something. There are people who would be filled with pain if you were hurt and shudder just imagining you collapsing to the ground. Did you really know that?”

“Yeah…”

There was nothing he could say to that.

What if it was the reverse? What if he was being disciplined for some mistake and couldn’t call himself a police officer? If he learned they were in danger during that time, would he abandon them just because he was a civilian for the time being?

Of course, a professional policeman could not exactly allow himself to put amateur minors in danger while doing his job, but he could at least understand why they would take action on their own.

He raised both hands in a sign of defeat.

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Good. That answer gets a perfect 100.”

Tsumada Mio smiled and rubbed his head like he was a small child. And since he had been in the wrong, he could not bring himself to brush her hand away.

With a sour look on his face he let her due as she pleased.

“Now, how about this?” she suggested. “Whatever you’re doing, my special trait is sure to be useful while you’re on the run.”

“…”

He thought for a moment and then gave his answer.

“No, I can’t use your help here.”

She puffed her cheeks out again.

“Oh, um, but I won’t be placing the whole burden on myself.”

He frantically corrected himself.

“The mastermind we’re after is out of reach. At this rate, we’ll never be able to settle this. Our first priority is dragging him out onto our field. Moving along in secret won’t do that. In fact, standing out even more than necessary would be perfect. And that means your power would have the opposite effect.”

“Ha ha. If you were actually thinking it through, then that’s fine. Good, good.”

When she clasped her hands in front of her chest and smiled brightly, he added in his heart that he had trouble dealing with this girl. Or rather, he always seemed to be at her mercy.

“But what exactly are you going to do? If you’ll tell us in advance, it doesn’t matter if it’s to me, Tomoe-chan, or Enbi-san. We won’t get jealous.”

“Okay then…”

There was no real point in hiding it.

“This person killed someone and framed us to acquire a certain object.”

“Is that so? And?”

“What if someone appeared in the public eye with something that looked exactly like that object? He wouldn’t be sure anymore if the one he had was real or not.”

Part 16 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

By the time I overcame the turmoil around me and regrouped with PSI_ver_RAIN, it was already evening. I explained my overall plan and had her tell me more about Professor Matsukai’s belt buckle.

“The belt was pretty unique. He said it was made of carbon something-or-other, so it was harder than diamond but still flexible. He apparently got the material from one of the university’s departments that had developed it as a prototype for use in a space elevator’s wire.”

As she tried to remember, she also checked the past video logs on her mobile glasses.

“But the buckle itself was something he just bought in a store. I think it was some kind of joke product. You’ll probably find one just like it for sale at an electronics store.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go next.”

The two of us made our way to a nearby electronics store. The evening must have been when gadget-loving officer workers stopped by on the way home from work because it was pretty crowded. Instead of rushing things, we followed the line up the escalator to our destination floor.

“Here we go. Is this it?”

Surprisingly, there was more than one type of USB memory belt buckle. I asked PSI_ver_RAIN since I had never seen the professor’s one and didn’t know which one it was.

But when I turned around, she was gone.

Instead, she was standing in front of the TVs a short distance away. I approached and found all of the large TVs playing the evening news. This particular news program was partially a talk show and it emphasized the emotional side of things to target the housewife demographic.

“As you can see, Professor Matsukai Hiroshi is believed to have been murdered in his laboratory at Keijou Ijuku University by…well, she’s a minor, so we can’t give her real name or show her face. But the girl also goes by the name PSI_ver_RAIN.”

“This is part of the madness brought by the internet age. A self-styled psychic middle school girl? It reeks of the occult. She is said to be even worse than Tarot Girls 22 as far as that’s concerned and I can’t understand why anyone would ever praise her. Have they been brainwashed?”

“Her songs are popular on video sites, but they’re kind of scary, aren’t they? Like that woman’s scream hidden in her latest song’s PV. Kya ha ha! And when you can have the Vocanoids sing, why do you even need her?”

Thanks to freedom of the press, everyone would say these people meant no harm, but the girl swallowed up by that deluge of sound and voices could not move a single step. She was simply overwhelmed.

“What was the point of anything I was doing?” muttered PSI_ver_RAIN. “Why won’t anyone believe me? Something’s clearly wrong here, so won’t someone at least say I wouldn’t do something like that? Were my fans no better than this?”

I hesitated to say something, but before I could…

“And that’s what a lot of people have been saying, but there are also others with a different view of PSI_ver_RAIN.”

…?

The female announcer’s voice strayed from the narrative I had expected. We both looked up in confusion as the woman on the TV continued.

“We did some research out on the streets and found a surprising number of people supporting PSI_ver_RAIN and claiming she was falsely accused. We asked one thousand different people and out of the 951 answers we received, 58% supported her, 30% opposed her, and the rest could not decide. Shockingly, a majority of people continue to support her even now.”

“She had no reason to kill. Her PVs’ view counts are still shooting up and her single CDs are neck and neck with Tarot Girls 22 even though she’s an amateur. That’s seventy-eight against one! She has influence online and an endless number of online friends. What complaint could she possibly have worth killing over?”

“Yeah, even if she really was going to kill someone, whether she used her psychic powers or not, wouldn’t she at least unlock the door before leaving? That negates the locked room scenario and makes plenty of other people suspects. The people hating on her aren’t being logical.”

“Rain-chan’s psychic powers can only be used to make people happy. It says so on her website! Eh heh heh. When I grow up, I want to be just like her.”

A different color enveloped the deluge of sound and voices.

She clenched her small fists around her skirt, clenched her teeth, and listened intently to those voices.

Finally, she spoke.

“People are going to say these people supported a murderer for standing up for me, aren’t they?”

“As things are now, yes.”

“It’ll look like I used the madness of the internet to brainwash them into a cult to support me.”

“Until we clear your name.”

We said nothing more.

PSI_ver_RAIN slapped her cheeks just once.

It was a ritual meant to wake her up.

“I don’t care what they say about me.”

Public opinion was split.

She turned her back on the TVs that were saying whatever they pleased and she made an announcement.

“But I have to protect the lives of the people who believed in me.”

Part 17 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

After getting the USB memory belt buckle we needed, we left the electronics store, I removed the product from its box, and PSI_ver_RAIN asked a question.

“What exactly are we going to do?”

“Can you grab that rock over there? I want to give it some noticeable marks and differences to make a better bluff.”

I scratched up the surface of the buckle and then tossed the small stone aside.

I checked the time on the Mystery Freak’s smartphone and then glanced through the TV schedule.

…Good, they’re doing one nearby.

“Let’s go to Teikyo Tower. It’s close enough to walk. One show always sends an announcer out there to do a live weather forecast at this time.”

Part 18 (Jinnai Shinobu)

When I got back home to the thatch-roof house afterschool, I found the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata, the Yuki Onna, and the Furutsubaki (small) discussing something in front of the TV.

They were covering their eyes with one hand and raising their voices to squeaky helium levels.

“Ehh? Well, he did always seem like the kind of guy who would do something like that.” (Zashiki Warashi)

“Yes, I remember him giving the most disturbing looks to any girls around.” (Yuki Onna)

“Um, why do I have to play along with this?” (Furutsubaki – Small)

That’s really inappropriate, you know!? Even if the fact that you’re joking means you don’t really think my uncle is a murderer!!

The Nekomata was curled up not far away and she sighed while flipping her two tails around.

“They sure are carefree. Does everything on TV seem like some distant world? You do know the people there are no different from us, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but if they’re making that uncle of mine out to be a villain, Tokyo’s gotta be a scary place.”

The talk shows had probably been talking about the same thing nonstop all day. That wasn’t going to help, so I snatched the remote away from them. Ha ha!

“Ah! But I was about to do an impression of the (young housewife) neighbor who was taking out her trash.”

“I’d suggest thinking about when you should stop this if you don’t want to fall victim to my old man’s fist. And there’s a show I want to watch.”

“What would that be?”

“An incredibly inappropriate weather forecast. The weather lady’s embarrassed expression is famous for being super sexy.”

Part 19 (3rd person)

Dong, dong. It is now five o’clock. Up next is Yuuko-san’s evening weather forecast!!

“Hi! This is the super beautiful meteorologist…ahh, it’s so embarrassing when I say it myself.…Randou Yuuko! We’re live from the base of Teikyo Tower as always, kyupin! …I want to die… Now, then. The atmospheric pressure this evening will be…”

A young woman with fluffy chestnut hair, a suit, and a tight skirt that gave an overall clean and pure impression forced a smile and waved something like a baton in front of the camera. A ton of onlookers had gathered behind her and were abusing the live broadcast to unfurl banners covered in dirty words until the security guards ran them off. Those jokes bordering on sexual harassment were part of what gave this weather forecast such unusually high ratings.

But it reached an entirely new level today.

First, an idiot held a poster of Yuuko-san's head pasted on top of a nude model.

Second, a group carrying bags from the rival gyudon chain of the show's sponsor walked conspicuously behind her.

And third, a detective wanted for murder suddenly ran up and forcefully grabbed the TV camera.

"Eh? Wah! Kyah!? Wh-what is going on!?"

The weather lady panicked, but the detective did not care.

He simply stared into the lens from point-blank range and sent a message to someone with a ferocious smile on his lips.

"Sorry, but I haven't been caught yet."

He flashed something like a belt buckle in front of the camera.

"And you weren't thorough enough, Katagiri-san. I hear Konrin Naraku retrieved this like you hired them to, but do you really have the real one? If you do, then it should have a scratch on it like this. And it should open with the combination 8963…like this. If not, then you only have one of the decoys the professor had prepared."

The hare on the run stood in front of the camera without running or hiding.

He seemed to be challenging the wolf pursuing him.

"I'm a detective. I'll do whatever it takes to hunt you down. Even if that means using this to join forces with them. With the search program on this USB memory, I can bring all your dirty deeds to light. I'll make you pay for framing PSI_ver_RAIN."

Katagiri Hitsuji was a member of the Restaurant Master, the former leader of the precision machinery industry, and the current leader of cutting-edge agriculture.

To make that switch, he had killed off the dying precision machinery industry while escaping it himself. In a way, he was a traitor.

"Our next stop is the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Once we're in there, we don't have to worry about any of your Konrin Naraku men getting to us. We'll decide how to handle things from there. I'll have PSI_ver_RAIN testify what actually happened there and I'll gather all the substantiating evidence we need. And then I'll use this real buckle to hunt you down, Katagiri Hitsuji-san. No matter what."

It did not matter if he truly held the real buckle or not.

He just had to cast doubt.

Was the one Katagiri had real? Even if it was, were there any copies? If the real one or a copy reached the Aoandon's group and was linked to the facility hidden in Nagatacho Station's shelter, whose secrets would be revealed to the world and how?

“You can’t escape now. Even if you pack your bags and escape overseas, the fingers of destruction will still tighten around you. So sit there in front of the TV and enjoy watching your life crumble away.”

After saying everything he had to say, Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa left the camera, slipped past the cowering meteorologist, and escaped through a gap in the onlookers.

Incidentally, the ratings that day ultimately exceeded 30%. For better or for worse, that was apparently a cause of worry for the station.

As Hishigami Enbi watched the broadcast while messing with her computer in her Roppongi secret base, she laughed.

“Not bad, detective.”

What could someone do and change in just thirty seconds or so of stolen airtime? The answer was not much.

But Uchimaku Hayabusa had no reason to use only the truth as a weapon.

Also, the internet was PSI_ver_RAIN’s home turf. She wasn’t going to rely only on that outdated mass media.

“I guess this is PSI_ver_RAIN and not the detective.”

The weather forecast was linked with a social commenting sight to display some comments on the edge of the screen. One of those comments alongside Hayabusa’s face said the following:

“Katagiri Hitsuji is a member of the Restaurant Master and a villain who framed PSI_ver_RAIN.”

That alone may have been meaningless and may not have moved anyone’s heart.

But there were more posts afterwards.

“The recent communication disturbances have been caused by Katagiri Hitsuji because he’s afraid of the truth getting out. The elites are threatened by the freedom of the internet.”

No new information was necessary.

Not even PSI_ver_RAIN’s name was needed.

The obvious problems before everyone’s eyes were linked to this incident to increase its topicality. A murder was someone else’s problem and a scandal was a show, but this went beyond that. By linking it to a problem that affected people’s lives directly, it was everyone’s problem.

Or at least, it seemed that way.

The truth of the infrastructure damage did not matter. A viral conspiracy theory was good enough. It did not even need to make a huge commotion. All that mattered was

that someone posted it, someone spread it around, and Katagiri Hitsuji himself saw his name popping up in more and more places.

This was the same as Panopticon and The Birth of the Prison. Katagiri Hitsuji had shined bright lights on the people to constantly view them while hidden by those very lights, so he was afraid of having his identity known.

Only doing it on TV might not have been enough.

Only doing it on the internet might not have been enough.

But the more complex structure of internet posts being shown on TV created an opening. The shocking footage of the live broadcast would gather eyes and ears which would then be exposed to the truth. Then, the second wave of attack would begin with nonsense on the internet.

Katagiri Hitsuji himself would bring the two together. A small leak of accurate information would be a problem, but so were lies spreading at an accelerated rate.

If he did not quiet them soon, it would grow beyond the limits of his damage control and his own lies would create a noose around his neck, so the only safe option was to crush the source before that monster of data bared its fangs.

And yet in truth, only five or six people in Japan may have been causing the entire commotion.

“A net idol, hm? That’s pretty scary. I guess the techniques used to make people smile can also be used to set a bad example like this.”

Enbi spoke to herself while making her own preparations.

“Time to help out. I’ll target a few of the popular social networking servers while leaving one major message board alive.”

She made a few clicks.

“And begin the DDoS attack. Once their online services freeze, will that old man start to fear that even more groundless accusations will pop up?”

In the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, Department 1 Chief Mezu Gen’s severe look had grown even more deeply wrinkled than usual. A supervisor experienced in field work spoke to him from the side.

“What do you think?”

“Hmph. Most likely a bluff. But he must think that’s fine as long as that VIP takes the bait. And if there is someone behind this, they’re willing to murder a man and bisect his torso to protect themselves. If they were willing to accept a ‘most likely’, they would have stopped before going that far.”

The phone rang. The detective who answered looked on the verge of tears, so Mezu Gen took over and heard a familiar voice.

It was Chief Superintendent Mishima.

“He’s really done it now, hasn’t he?”

“I will contact the personnel department and have him disciplined.”

“No, that’s not how I meant it. You know who the winner is here, don’t you?”

“…But he didn’t go far enough.”

“No. He may have drawn out Katagiri Hitsuji, but I doubt he can finish him off. He’ll have a frustrating experience and then it’ll be all over. Just like what happened to me in the past. …You too for that matter.”

The man on the phone laughed before continuing.

“So what do you think we should do? Should we do the responsible thing and remain silent or should we bring back our old naiveté and childishly cheer him on? Which do you think would be best?”

In Hachi TV’s office building, Atou Minori was being chewed out by her middle-aged boss after going against the station’s wishes by running a program supporting PSI_ver_RAIN.

“Public opinion of our media is bad enough already, so what were you thinking!? How could you hand them a report that supported a murderer!?”

“I was misappropriating the airwaves. That’s all.”

“Why you…!!”

“Besides, PSI_ver_RAIN is still only a suspect. She hasn’t even been taken into custody or indicted yet. Making your show on the assumption she’s a murderer sounds even more unfair to me. And we did mention both the supporting and non-supporting opinions.”

“You understand, don’t you? If it turns out she’s really the murderer, you’re fired.”

“Right back at you. If it turns out she isn’t the murderer, you’re going to be in trouble. You were all for broadcasting false charges and about a minor girl no less. If it gets out that sloppy reporting job was on your orders, PSI_ver_RAIN will be lifted up to Joan of Arc levels and you’ll be treated like utter trash. There’s no way the station will keep you around.”

“…!!”

“And why did you force through a program like that anyway?”

Atou Minori asked a challenging question.

“Is it possible someone gave an obvious boost to your bank account so you would manipulate public opinion?”

And on the top floor of a high-rise building, an elderly man in Japanese clothing bit his lip like a child. After a wet tearing sound, some blood seeped out.

He struck the phone on the table and yelled with it on speakerphone.

“What is going on!? I thought you had retrieved it!?”

“We did retrieve the buckle. But we never considered the possibility it had been swapped out with a fake. You were the one that told us to destroy it without checking the contents.”

“He used my name! He said ‘Katagiri Hitsuji’ in front of the camera! He mentioned the Restaurant Master that is supposed to control everything while hiding in the shadows of history!! It’s even reached the social networking sites!!”

“Please calm down. You can’t exactly blame us for this.”

Getting the work done as quickly as possible had come back to bite him.

If he still had the buckle around, he could check the data on it to confirm the truth.

“You really can’t tell if that buckle he showed on camera is real or fake!?”

“There is no way of proving it one way or another. I would need it in my hands to check what is on it.”

“…!!”

Katagiri Hitsuji was not a fool. If that detective really had the buckle, he would not need to show it off like that. So it was most likely a bluff. It was like fishing. The detective had thrown some delicious-looking bait into the water and was waiting for a bite. That meant the detective could not do anything if Katagiri Hitsuji did not react. Doing nothing at all was the best course of action.

He knew that. He knew that, he knew that, he knew that!!

But even so, there was a mere 10% chance it was real or a backup copy. Even that small a chance of his destruction was frightening enough, so he could not stop himself from trembling.

“Prepare your men, Konrin Naraku.”

“For what exactly?”

“Attack him and take it from him. I’ll nip even the smallest threat in the bud and I’ll pay whatever it takes!! So hurry up and attack before he arrives at the Metropolitan Police Department!!”

“I must apologize.”

Something unbelievable happened.

That underling from the king of fast food argued back at him with mockery in his voice.

It was like throwing aside the cheap manual and spitting on the customer’s face.

“We are assassins. And no professional will list something they cannot do on their menu.”

“Wha-…?”

“First, all forms of transportation are down at the moment, so we have no way of getting the personnel and weapons there quickly. Second, we only know the general course the target will take. That is too little information to lay an ambush and we cannot put together a surefire attack plan in such a short time. Third, I see little reason to stick with you any longer when you’re already sinking fast.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying? I…I am…I am the Restaurant Mas-…!!”

“But by tomorrow, you might have lost that status and might even be behind bars. In fact, killing you to aid my own escape might be the better bet here. There’s sure to be plenty of confusion during your arrest and I doubt they can keep you perfectly guarded at all times.”

Katagiri Hitsuji was left speechless.

If someone on this level was looking down on him, it was proof enough that his empire had fallen.

“We will not act,” continued the king of fast food. “If you wish to protect yourself, go right ahead. I am praying you can greet tomorrow’s sunrise with a smile so that you might continue to purchase our services. Goodbye.”

As his coup de grace of impoliteness, he hung up.

Katagiri Hitsuji hit redial several times, but the other man never picked up.

“…”

The old man’s mind remained blank for a good while.

But he could not just sit around. If no one was going to stop this, the detective with the dubious buckle would reach the Metropolitan Police Department.

“Dammit…”

He placed a hand on and tore at the hair remaining by the old scar on the side of his head, but then he grabbed a small key in his trembling hand and unlocked a drawer on his large business desk.

He pulled out an automatic handgun with forbidden ivory decorating the grip. The domestic firearm used 8mm ammunition which was rare in modern times, so it was more of an antique than a weapon.

“Dammit!! Why do I have to rely on something like this!?”

The answer was simple. No matter how much he dressed himself up, he was still just a thug.

Part 20 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

PSI_ver_RAIN and I left the plaza below Teikyo Tower.

I looked around the area and spotted a riot policeman stepping down from a large police motorcycle to faithfully crack down on a case of illegal parking even during this panic.

Before he got back, I climbed on the motorcycle that still had the key in the ignition.

Hey, this thing's based on the Falcon Hunter model. I can feel destiny on my side, partner.

After PSI_ver_RAIN sat on the back of the seat and wrapped her arms around my waist, I twisted the grip to open the throttle.

"I'll be borrowing this."

"Ah, hey! Wait!"

The roar of the engine drowned out the cry of protest and we quickly took off along the road. There were small-scale traffic jams all over the place, so the motorcycle really came in handy. We could weave in between traffic and the police cars couldn't give chase even if they noticed us.

"I'm going to use the biggest roads I can so we'll be as noticeable as possible! It's to lure out the guy behind all this, but it'll also increase the risk. I know this isn't something a police officer should say to a civilian, but prepare yourself!!"

"Didn't I tell you I don't care about myself? I'll help you with anything as long as it will protect the lives of those who believed in me!!"

I checked in the mirror and saw PSI_ver_RAIN desperately trying to hold her hat down behind me. We both yelled over the violent wind as I accelerated further. The police motorcycle was made for car chases, so we passed 100 kph in no time at all.

Yes, yes! This noise, this wind, this vibration, this acceleration! This takes me back to when I was racing around my rural home.

Hairpin Killer Hayabusa is back!!

Then sirens started blaring. Three identical police motorcycles merged in from smaller roads. Some police cars had probably been sent out too, but they were stuck in the traffic jams.

"Attention, suspect!! Slow down at once and park on the curb! We have been given permission to fire on any dangerous criminal carrying a firearm! I said stop, you dirty cop!!"

"Hey, which do you think they are!?"

"If they were with Konrin Naraku, they probably would have started shooting already. Either way, we need to lose them!!"

The bike chase began.

Unlike on a normal road, we made our way forward by weaving between the stopped cars of the traffic jam. I was lucky when there were seventy whole centimeters between cars. I was zooming through at over 100 kph, but it felt like twice that.

“Is the guy behind this really going to show up!?”

“If you’re worried, agitate him even further! Make it so obvious he has to take the bait!!”

“I’m trying!!”

I checked in the side mirror and saw PSI_ver_RAIN holding her hat on her head and operating her mobile glasses with her eyes.

“I’ve been recording all sorts of stuff. Even when you fired your gun to save that swimsuit girl. I’m scattering it across the video sites. Someone wanting to paint us both as villains won’t want it known that you were acting in justified self-defense!!”

“I thought no one would trust videos and posts from you!”

“Things are already changing. It began when you showed your face on TV and the waves of attack began on the internet. No one really cares what’s accurate anymore. Whether it’s inappropriate or not, they’re going to jump at what’s more eye-grabbing and more interesting!”

I started getting a stomachache as the chase continued, but then something odd happened.

Horns started honking all around us. Things seemed to be shifting in our favor and the drivers stuck in the traffic jam seemed to be cheering us on.

Before long, some even opened their windows and shouted angrily out.

“You on the police bikes! Let them through!!”

“They’re going to the Metropolitan Police Department anyway, aren’t they!? Then what’s the point of arresting them? Are you chasing them around so you can take the credit!?”

And finally…

“Wow! Look at that! The cars are opening their doors behind us!”

“I’m thankful, but that’s really dangerous!!”

As I had said, we were weaving through the gaps of the cars in the traffic jam, so opening the doors filled those gaps. If they kept doing it, our pursuers couldn’t keep up the chase.

After leaving that small traffic jam, we started down a wide open road.

At the same time, several police cars attacked us without their previous handicap. And they didn’t bother warning us this time. They took advantage of their greater weight by trying to crash into us from the side!

“Dammit! Are there post-apocalyptic mohawked thugs behind the wheels of those things!?”

I slammed on the brakes, letting the cars pass by ahead of us and then started going full throttle once more. The cars shot to the side while working to regain their balance, so we passed right by them.

Teikyo Tower and the Metropolitan Police Department were not that far from each other, but the distance seemed to stretch out infinitely due to the extreme tension.

Meanwhile, a group of red lights appeared up ahead.

Several police cars ignored the lane markings, turned their steering wheels to the side on the straight road, and finally forced themselves to a stop while perpendicular to the road. They intended to stop us with their makeshift barricade.

“What are we going to do!?”

“They didn’t have time to build it up properly!! We can slip through the gaps, so hold on! I’m going to turn right then left, so shift your weight with me!”

I didn’t have time to give a detailed explanation of the route.

I opened the throttle to the limit and weaved in a half S-shape to just barely slip through the not-quite-closed barricade of cars arranged like mille-feuille. Afterwards, I heard breaking glass and bending steel behind us as the pursuing police cars slammed into the barricade.

“Ah ha ha.”

PSI_ver_RAIN laughed.

I suddenly realized the grim situation had kept me from seeing a carefree smile on her face.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!! We’re running from the police on a stolen police bike with no helmet and we’re even causing accidents!! Is this really the capital of Japan!? I could probably turn this into the PV for a new song!!”

We had lost pursuit for the time being, but more police would reach us as we approached Sakuradamon.

Where would they make their move?

Everything so far had been mere preparation. Our enemy wasn’t going to sit around doing nothing. They had to have a surefire idea of how to finish us off and mock all of our efforts.

“Here they come again. …!? It’s from above this time!! There’s a helicopter!!”

“Hold on! Whatever they send out, we just have to lose it!!”

Part 21 (3rd person)

Katagiri Hitsuji trembled all alone.

There was no one else to delegate this job to. It was bad enough that his handgun would be found if the police questioned him and searched his possessions, but he also had to walk through the city on foot instead of using a chauffeured limousine.

He swore to himself he would retire from the Restaurant after finishing this job. He already had enough money to live and enjoy himself until the day he died. Continuing his work had only been a matter of pride. He had used the Restaurant as a safety device to ensure his dark past never came to light, but that was on the verge of breaking and the Restaurant itself could easily turn on him now. Since he might very well find himself in handcuffs by the next day, he could hardly worry about pride. He focused on quitting and going somewhere safe.

So…

(I'll settle this once and for all. Even if it means dirtying my own hands, I'll end this here.)

He had no intelligence network, so he did not even know what route Uchimaku Hayabusa and PSI_ver_RAIN would take to reach the Metropolitan Police Department. At first glance, an ambush seemed impossible, but there was one definite location.

Yes.

Right in front of the Metropolitan Police Department itself.

(I'll be safe as long as I can crush this. Nothing will ever threaten my lifestyle again. I'll crush the Aoandon Package no matter what it takes. I'll crush it!! I won't let it see the light of day for even an instant!!)

He heard the roaring of an engine.

The uniformed police officer guarding the front entrance shouted "Whoa, he really made it here!? What is with that guy!?" and a bowling ball-like weight pressed down on Katagiri Hitsuji's stomach. He had always used money to delegate away any dirty jobs, so he had never expected to feel this kind of pressure again.

The detective on a police motorcycle gave a look of both relief and disappointment.

The man may have thought he would be safe if he made it this far, but that was exactly what created an opening.

"Let's get this started," muttered Katagiri Hitsuji while reaching into his pocket.

He then rushed over to the materials entrance.

Part 22 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Dry gunshots rang out.

I immediately shoved PSI_ver_RAIN from the back of the seat and behind the stopped police motorcycle. That much went well.

But then I felt a scorching sensation and smelled something like rust.

I clenched my teeth to bear with the pain, pulled my own handgun from my pocket, and held it forward. I just had to last ten more seconds. If I could silence this guy, it would all work out. So that was all I had to do!

We exchanged gunfire and our bullets tore at each other's lives.

I had been firing from the motorcycle, but I finally couldn't stay upright. The motorcycle and I both collapsed to the side.

As I fell, the buckle fell from my suit pocket.

Sparks flew as one of the old man's bullets hit the center of the buckle.

PSI_ver_RAIN shouted something while moving the heavy motorcycle to the side and dragging me out from under it.

Then Nakata-san and the rest of the guards out front ran over.

"Freeze!!"

"Possession of a handgun confirmed! 5:20 PM! Moving to arrest criminal!!"

Despite taking several bullets to the limbs and gut, the old man got up under his own power. He was stained with blood here and there, but he was still smiling.

"Let me go. No one can arrest me."

"What…are you talking about?"

"Strategic cultural property. That designation applies to the seeds of brand-name crops, the methods used to grow them, the industrial art made from them…and the living national treasures that make them. In other words, *I am a strategic cultural property*. Anything with that designation is considered a national asset and is erased from all official records to keep it secret. Even if those records belong to a murder trial."

The old man spun his handgun around to draw attention to it.

"So you can't arrest me even if I show this off. You can't keep it as evidence when the arrest is determined to have 'never happened'. You can write up and submit as much paperwork as you want, but I doubt anyone will be sent to trial when the suspect field is blank."

What he was saying gradually sank in.

Mishima had said the truth behind Nagatacho Station was designated a specially designated secret and a strategic cultural property. By intentionally placing multiple information protection systems on it, no one knew whose jurisdiction it fell under. And he had mentioned the Restaurant Master as someone on the same level.

This was what he had meant.

The old man could be arrested and a trial could be held, but the name field would remain blank. It would all end up in the following scenario: "****** is sentenced to life in prison for the crime of murder. But who is ******?"

He was a living national treasure.

In the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, the government had promised to provide support in protecting and repairing anything designated an important cultural property. It also required a thorough preservation of the status quo. And that applied to scenery, buildings, works of art, and the individuals known as living national treasures.

With a strategic cultural property, the law probably went a step further and said “no matter what”. It would be problematic if they were abducted by a foreign spy, killed, executed, or otherwise allowed to die. So the government would do whatever it took to *maintain the status quo* even if that meant overturning any kind of criminal conviction. It was all for the benefit of the nation.

But did he really have that kind of protection?

Hadn’t that entire system been newly created by people like him who worked behind the scenes so they could never be charged with a crime? Hadn’t they made this so they were as untouchable as a deadly Youkai even if they killed someone?

“That’s utter nonsense! Do you really think you’ll get away with doing all that just to protect yourself!?”

“The system may change in the future, but it will be too late to catch me. I don’t care if this creates the greatest scandal of all time as long as I am not actually imprisoned. And as long as they don’t divulge any secrets powerful enough to shake the entire Restaurant structure, the system can easily handle a simple case of firing a gun. But Detective Uchimaku, I will be leaving now. I’ve destroyed the USB memory belt buckle, so there is no chance of the Aoandon’s Package being used now. Not even the slightest chance. As long as I dispose of all the little pieces of evidence while you try to settle your own issues, I can return to my own comfortable life.”

At that moment, the police department’s front entrance opened and Division 1’s chief stepped out. He quickly glanced over the tragic scene and ultimately fixed his eyes on Katagiri Hitsuji.

“Long time no see.”

“What is it? I was just about to leave.”

“So you’re designated a living national treasure and thus a strategic cultural property, are you? And so your name can’t appear on any official paperwork, even for a murder trial?”

“Unfair, isn’t it? But those are the rules of this country.”

“Yes, terribly unfair.”

For some reason, the department chief gave the old man a look of pity.

“Those rules only apply when all of the official paperwork has been submitted and approved by the cabinet at the time. And that means they don’t apply if anything was missed there.”

“Wait…? What are you talking about?”

“The submitted paperwork was reviewed and a slight error was discovered in one of the forms. And thus *you were never officially considered a strategic cultural property in the first place*. Yes, I just received word from the head of the ruling party.”

“I never… I never heard anything about that!!”

“Didn’t I just tell you? This country’s rules are terribly unfair. …Arrest him.”

The one command settled it all.

Like army ants swarming a sugar cube, Nakata-san and the other police officers restrained the old man who had risen to such lonely heights.

What had happened without my knowledge?

I blankly watched the old man’s back as he was handcuffed.

Then the department chief spoke up.

“You need to thank Chief Superintendent Mishima. He made up for everything you lacked. We are limited to only protecting the law and order of Tokyo, so we could never have done it on our own.”

“Mishima-san…did?”

“I have no idea what exactly he did, but we could apparently find out if we used the Aoandon Package to divulge all of Japan’s secret rules. …But would you really want to know?”

Part 23 (3rd person)

In a National Police Agency office, a man spun like a child in a leather chair.

He sighed quietly while a subordinate reported on their progress over the office phone.

“So it’s over for now, is it?”

“Sounds that way,” someone replied.

A young woman in a tank top and hot pants leaned against the wall with her arms crossed instead of using the sofa meant for guests. These two would normally have never interacted. If they ever saw each other, they should only have tilted their heads and wondered why the other was not dead yet, but the two were unnaturally gathered here.

“I wish we could tie things up this nicely every time.”

“Don’t get cocky now, okay? I know you haven’t forgotten what happened when you tried to create a mass-produced paranormal unit meant to directly judge crimes involving Youkai.”

“I know. And I can never repay the debt I owe to Hyakki Yakou’s previous generation. …It was my arrogance that led to that husband and wife’s death. And that’s what held this country back by thirty years.”

His face had grown pale and his chair had stopped moving.

“Anyway, this should have settled everything related to that belt buckle. Both the real one retrieved by Katagiri Hitsuji and Konrin Naraku and the fake one prepared by Uchimaku-kun.”

“Yes.”

“In that case…”

Chief Superintendent Mishima grabbed the laptop on top of his desk. Without a change of expression, he threw it at Mai’s face as hard as he could. It slipped right past her face, slammed into the wall, and fell to the floor.

The screen displayed countless error messages, but not even they could hide the fear contained there.

“Why is the deepest portion of Nagatacho Station running? The Aoandon Package is still connected!!”

“I can only think of one possibility.” Mai sounded entirely calm. “Professor Matsukai Hiroshi had already sent the completed search program to the Aoandon via the internet before Konrin Naraku bisected him. The buckle really was just a portable backup, so it isn’t surprising that the main storage lay elsewhere.”

“You mean…?”

“The Aoandon’s group has acquired the entire system of Japan. I don’t know what they’re going to use it for, but they have no real reason to wait any longer.

The Hishigami woman spoke the words befitting that role.

“The countdown has ended. All that’s left is the destruction of this nation.”

Part 24 (Aoandon)

Search Target: Nagatacho Station Data (Deepest Sector)

Search Term: Japanese DNA Standard

Oh, how troublesome.

Facilities with DNA in cold storage sounded like something from a cyberpunk or SF story that you wouldn’t just find lying around, but they were everywhere. They were all over the place. There were obvious ones like police-related facilities, sperm banks, and gene therapy or organ transplant centers, but there were also germ research labs, biometrics development, brand-name rice and cow research, zoos, aquariums, people who wanted to store the DNA of dinosaurs or famous people, and even dubious companies that would store a customer’s DNA to carry them five hundred years into the future.

That made it hard to know where what we wanted was. And a thorough search would eventually give away what we were after, so I had wanted a system to give me the answer right away.

Beginning Search.

Searching…

Oh, and a “standard” referred to an actual object that provided a standard definition of something. There was one for the kilogram, the meter, and plenty of other things. This one was for Japanese DNA, so you can guess what that means, right?

They had apparently gotten help from the daughters of esteemed old families to define what exactly a Japanese person is and what genetic sequence that entailed. Of course, there are a number of theories about the origins of the Japanese. There was the indigenous theory, the monophyletic theory, and plenty of others, so that attempt didn’t get very far. They had ultimately taken a few different samples that they thought might be where the Japanese came from and then gathered them together. There were as many samples as there were theories.

And while studying those samples, an interesting theory arose from a different viewpoint entirely.

Have you ever heard of junk DNA? DNA normally refers to the accumulated information that lets children inherit traits of their parents, but 97% of it is junk with no actual hereditary information at all. But it’s still a storage medium and the unnecessary information inside the DNA is still passed down from parent to child. So what’s there? What if a human embryo simply can’t read it and it contains data unrelated to the inheritance of physical traits? For example, what if it has secretly absorbed and recorded information concerning the local land and environment and what if that information had been passed down all this time? Wouldn’t that go beyond those samples? Wouldn’t all of the lives born in Japan be filled with shared information on the land known as Japan? If so, they could achieve their initial goal by decoding that junk DNA and preserving the environmental data built up over generations.

If the many samples all contained a shared junk factor, they would have a sign pinpointing a life born in this land.

It was really only an amusing theory for them, but it was incredibly interesting to the likes of us.

After all, the people of this country didn’t even know the name of their own country. Was it “Nihon” or “Nippon”? And during the Olympics or the World Cup it would transform into “Japan”. To be blunt, I was pretty sure no other country in the entire world had remained in such an undefined state for so long.

That made the Japanese something of an illusion contained in a vaguely-defined category.

It was enough to leave them worried if they didn’t find something to define themselves.

But then what if we got our hands on that Japanese DNA Standard? What if we messed with it as we saw fit?

The answer was simple. Like with a doll curse, the definition of what made someone “Japanese” would be rewritten.

We could make them into whatever we wanted: the Japanese have horns growing from their head, the Japanese fly through the sky using the wings on their back, the Japanese primarily eat raw slugs, the Japanese are a bunch of perverts who go to work and school in the nude, etc. etc.

Wouldn't that be fun? Of course it would. It would be the ultimate entertainment brought on by the very catastrophe you wished for yourselves.

Search Complete: Location Confirmed.

Border between Intellectual Village Noukotsu Village and Bozen City. Flower Offering Route 4 at the base of Mt. Boseki. Livestock Research Center. Third Genetic Cold Storage Warehouse.

"Found it☆"

Oh, that's the mountain where I met Sachi-chan before. And Noukotsu Village, hm? That's where that boy lives, so I can feel destiny at work here.

It was time to begin and I had no real reason to hesitate.

Get ready, Japanese. Yes, all 150 million of you. I'm about to begin the ultimate performance that you've been waiting for amid all this boredom and oppression. So make sure you enjoy it until your very soul drowns in it.

Part 25 (3rd person)

The highest leader of Hyakki Yakou was a girl of about ten. She was known as Hafuri and had arrived at a domestic aircraft factory in Kobe. She wore mourning clothes filled with sorrow. Were they meant as a tribute to the Aoandon's group, as a demonstration of her intention to personally visit an area of near certain death, or as an outward symbol of her feelings toward the falling archipelago?

"Oh, dear. Where did you hear that from? You're being completely unreasonable."

A young man dressed casually in a kimono spoke casually on a wide runway.

He was Hishigami Kyou. Of the Hishigami men, he was third in line to inheriting the family, but the girl in mourning clothes bearing the Hyakki Yakou emblem was not to be outdone.

"I'm sur you know our mobile base was destroyed by the Aoandon's group. I received word that I could obtain a replacement here at Hishigami Aerospace Industries."

"If you want to hold such unreasonable business discussions, could you take it to the Toyokawa Group? Their cars keep getting recalled, so I expect they would jump at any request you made."

"The infrastructure damage has affected them too badly to function."

Hishigami Kyou shook his head and a note of resignation entered his voice.

"It would be hard to call anything here a product. After the Three Principles on Arms Exports were relaxed, we have been testing the production lines of our new factories

to make sure they work properly. You could call these answer sheets, so we did not intend to sell them."

"But that means no one has claimed them and we have a chance to secretly purchase them."

"…Is the situation that dire?"

"If you will accept an estimate, the entire concept of Japan as a nation will vanish within approximately 24 hours."

"Honestly, it can be scary what qualifies as reasonable. Especially when it changes entirely from one second to the next. If that's the age we live in, I suppose it would be reasonable to sell them to you."

With a heavy sound, the door to the giant hangar-like factory behind him opened to the left and right. With weak blasts of jet engines, large flying machines exited.

There were six strategic stealth bombers that should not have existed in Japan.

There was also an airborne warning and control aircraft to command them.

"That should suffice for our new base."

"But due to the short notice, we could not decorate the interior. I doubt it is exactly to your liking. These are nothing more than bare military weapons."

"Given the situation, that is actually preferable. You can confirm receipt of payment at any time. Oh, and can we take them right away?"

"You really are unreasonable…"

Hafuri ignored him and raised a hand.

A great number of personnel rushed toward their new wings. There was nothing to hide behind on the runway, so it was impossible to tell where they had been hidden.

"Our destination is Noukotsu Village. I wanted to avoid a fight with civilians around, but we have no choice here. We will deploy at once and attack the Aoandon's group. We must do whatever it takes to prevent the Japanese DNA Standard from falling into their hands!"

Part 26 (Jinnai Shinobu)

It was wrong to my uncle, but the commotion really had felt like something contained to the world inside the TV.

I had believed we were safe and that we only needed to wait for word that everything had ended without major incident.

So when I heard the explosive sound, I immediately shrank back.

"Wh-what the hell!?"

I first looked up to the ceiling and then ran out to the yard.

I saw something unbelievable there.

A group of giant bombers was flying through the sky.

Several fighters flew about to protect them. And instead of just passing by, they were moving at a leisurely pace as if they had chosen the sky above our village as their hunting grounds.

I recalled what the Nekomata had said.

“They sure are carefree. Does everything on TV seem like some distant world? You do know the people there are no different from us, don’t you?”

She was exactly right.

On that day, Noukotsu Village was visited by a catastrophe that could easily be called a war.

Epilogue: Destruction, Execution

Jinnai Shinobu was suddenly thrown into an unbelievable situation and he was on the verge of tears from the very beginning. But he knew just how serious Hyakki Yakou and similar groups were. He knew how easily precious human life would be lost once a legitimate battle began.

Several faces appeared in his mind's eye, but he started by running into the thatch-roof house. He had to tell his father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother of the threat. Or so he thought.

"Granny! Dammit!!"

His grandmother was collapsed in the middle of the hall. He thought it may have been a sudden illness, but he was wrong. He was only an amateur, but he didn't see anything obvious like pain or paleness on her face. It almost looked like she was sleeping.

But she would not wake up no matter how much he called for her or shook her shoulders.

"Shinobu, something's wrong in the brewery too. I don't hear any of the young men yelling."

"So it isn't just granny?"

Something was happening, but he did not know what.

He left his grandmother with the Zashiki Warashi and made his way from the backyard to the brewery. It was a delicate facility, so he had to wear a simple white protective suit to keep germs out. After being slowed down by that preparation, he peered through the heavy door he was normally not allowed through and saw men dressed in the same type of protective suit collapsed on the floor. One of them was his father. A bubbling sound came from a bucket twice as tall as he was, so he initially suspected it was some kind of gas.

But he was wrong again. That was not what was going on here.

"Zashiki Warashi, Succubus, Furutsubaki! Put on protective suits and help me carry out my dad and the others. Oh, not you Yuki Onna. They've told you to stay away from the brewery, haven't they!?"

Inhuman Youkai were convenient at times like this. They easily lifted up the human bodies like they were paper bags. They also found and gathered Shinobu's mother and grandfather.

It was obvious where they had to go.

Shinobu could not imagine what those bombers held inside, but he knew they could not outlast it just by trembling inside their house.

And the one with the greatest power was the Yuki Onna.

“We’ll be using your ice room.”

After stating his intention, Shinobu opened the door on the kitchen floor. An intense chill rose from it, but he went on to say more.

“Listen, Yuki Onna. Everyone here is only sleeping. If we just threw them inside the ice room, they’d die. So I don’t care if it’s an igloo or what. Just *make something out of snow to keep them warm*. And make it as solid as possible on the outside. Solid enough to defend against a bomb. Can you do that?”

“…Easily…”

Shinobu thought while he and the Youkai removed their protective suits.

He thought of the Zashiki Warashi, the Nekomata, both Furutsubaki, and the harmless Youkai his mother had brought in, but none of them were enough to deal with Hyakki Yakou in their mobile base. Who could properly deal with an entire group or organization? After some more thought, he spoke up.

“Succubus.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“You controlled a large organization known as the European Security Force, right? Lend me your knowledge to fight against these people and drive them off.”

“Well, you are my current master. If you make a contract to that end, I will obey.”

“Shinobu.”

“I know it’s dangerous! But Madoka, Nagisa, the Love King, Tarou, and tons of other people are still in the village! I’m not going to let them destroy it all for their own convenience!”

With that said, Shinobu ran from the thatch-roof house with the Succubus in tow.

Things were not much better outside.

People were lying collapsed on the ground, a light electric truck had crashed into a dry paddy field, and he spotted a Lamp Obake and Umbrella Obake panicking on a farm road.

“S-someone! Anyone! Is there a doctor around!?”

“Mhh, was everyone really wiped out? 119 isn’t even answering.”

(You idiots.)

Shinobu’s face turned blue, not red.

He did not even have it in him to feel anger.

(You should have stayed inside the house! I’m sure the other Youkai have all fled already!!)

“Hey, Lantern and Umbrella! Come with me if you want to live!!”

“Eh? What? B-but Hiro-sama and his mother are…”

“We need to figure out what caused that and you can’t rely on the fact that Youkai don’t die. So don’t just wander around, got it!?”

Shinobu sounded full of himself, but that was only due to his experience in a few different incidents. In truth, he was only a high school boy. He could use a Package against itself, but he could not produce any paranormal power himself.

But they could.

Hyakki Yakou and similar groups most definitely could.

It was a peaceful village.

Areas of woods remained among the expanses of dry paddy fields. Hafuri, leader of Hyakki Yakou, built up her formation hidden inside one such area. It looked like a scene from a battle in the Warring States period. Except, that is, for the many invisibility and defense barriers set up around her. No one could see her and no one could get through to her. That was her position as the brains.

The airborne warning and control aircraft and strategic stealth bombers overhead were only a diversion.

They did not know how many people were in the Aoandon’s group, but that group’s focus would be on the heavens. And while they carelessly looked skyward, Hyakki Yakou would tear out their windpipe from below.

“The Top Five are all in position.”

“Understood. Everyone, begin the attack. Use the bombing and paranormal together to complete this as quickly as possible. It would help if you could keep the damage to civilians to a minimum, but if you deem that impossible, make your own decision.”

As soon as she gave those orders, an explosive sound reached her.

But it did not come from the smart bombs dropped from the bombers flying overhead or from a largescale attack carried out by Hyakki Yakou’s elite warriors.

Far, far too suddenly, the Aoandon had run up to Hafuri’s side.

Her speed was so great that the countless broken barriers only burst after the fact.

“…!?”

Before she could cry out, a young aide’s windpipe was slashed in a horizontal line.

And before the fresh blood could spray out, the Aoandon’s claws turned around to target Hafuri’s vitals.

“Young lady!!”

The Mamedanuki that acted as her body double (she was a tanuki Youkai that was as small as a stuffed animal) cut in. The entire scenery grew distorted and they all

vanished, but the Aoandon did not even look surprised. She breathed in just once and blew flames from her lips like a bluish-white flamethrower.

“Hot!?”

“Ah ha ha! Tanuki transform by spreading their ballsack, but it’s commonly said they’ll reveal their true form after dropping ashes from their pipe!!”

The Aoandon spoke up in delight when she saw the scenery grow distorted again and Hafuri’s group appear out of thin air.

“Hi there. I’m the final boss. Nice to meet you. Were you surprised that I broke through the middle right off the bat?”

“…”

“It’s no use. Those Top Five of yours are busy with my team members. Kada-chan sends out a sandstorm made of the soot and impurities found on Buddhist temples and statues. Sakogawa-chan uses a Makura-Gaeshi to directly remove the target’s soul from their body. Iko-chan converts all of someone’s emotions into hatred to spread curses around. …Oh, wait. Saiki Kazu crushed that one. Well, there’s plenty of others. They might be in trouble if they tried to force their way through, but they can at least buy some time.”

The blue female oni smiled while extending her unnaturally sharp claws.

“And Hyakki Yakou is all about bloodline, so if I kill you, they’ll all lose their mental pillar of support. This is just like shogi or chess; take one particular piece and you win the game.”

“Do you really think we’ll let you do that so easily?”

“Let me tell you something neat.” The Aoandon giggled and continued. “I bring together and exist beyond one hundred fears. By gathering all of those scary stories, I can combine different parts to reproduce paranormal powers that I didn’t originally have.”

Some stories were quite similar.

For example, the Yuki Onna and the Ubume were entirely different Youkai, but depending on the legend, they both stood on the side of the road, they both begged a traveler to hold their baby, and they both crushed that traveler under the ever-growing weight of the baby.

Had a well-known legend influenced another Youkai or were they both products of the same basic fear and had thus been developed independently in different times and places? That did not particularly matter.

What mattered was that similar legends could be created.

The individual Youkai traits were not exclusive to those individual Youkai.

“Do these combinations give me 100 x 100? Or is it 100 to the 100th power? No, it’s like paint. The materials are limited, but the possibilities are limitless. Saiki Kazu’s paranormal techniques and Matsukai Hiroshi’s search program really are the best.

You could even call them art. Thanks to that, I have surpassed the concept of numbers.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Are you familiar with the Youkai known as the Aburatori? That child-killing Youkai has lost the traditions of fear. It simply appears, simply abducts, and simply kills. That’s all it does.”

She pointed straight at Hafuri.

Yes, at the center of the ten-year-old girl’s chest.

“If I emulate that, you can’t escape. I don’t know any other Youkai more perfect for killing a child.”

That made this checkmate.

That announcement meant it was already over.

Or so it would have been.

“Illness Magic.”

If only the girl had not muttered those two words.

A moment later, something stood up next to the girl.

Something grew from the ground like a fast-forwarded video of a mushroom or bamboo shoot growing. It was the girl known as Hafuri. However, her height had increased, her facial features had changed, her chest had grown, and the shape of her waist had become much more seductive. She was wearing black mourning clothes that hid her frame, but the curves of her body still showed through. Her arms and legs were long and slender.

Adult and child stood there.

And the two Hafuris were linked by marionette-like strings made of hyphae.

“Wha-…?”

“This is my predicted body at the age of twenty. The power of Illness Magic can accomplish even this sort of heresy.”

The technique had originally been developed in case a successor was needed in a hurry. In other words, it was an artificial surrogate mother. After studying Hafuri’s current young form, a substitute body had been thoroughly redesigned based on what she would look like as an adult. And it was of course accurate enough to take Hafuri’s ovum into its artificial womb and give birth in her place. Even if Hafuri herself had ordered him to make it, the Illness Magic User had essentially created the ultimate Dutch wife based on his master’s adult form. On the day of its completion, he had reported his success and then attempted suicide on the spot. It had taken the combined efforts of the other Top Five to stop him.

“This will have removed me from the fatal range of the Aburatori. After all, I am both a child and an adult. Just as the umbilical cord connecting mother and child combines them into the single category of a ‘pregnant woman’, the individual known as Hafuri now exists as both the large and the small.”

“I see. But didn’t I tell you? My limited materials provide unlimited possibilities. I have plenty of other fatal Youkai in stock!!”

“Then Venom Clairvoyant, lend me your eyes.”

A pale red light came from the sexy Hafuri’s eyes.

A moment later, the Aoandon sent her deadly claws out quickly enough to create multiple afterimages, but the two Hafuris moved together to easily dodge them. They moved at the same time, in the same direction, and with the same movements. They were entirely synchronized.

“What!?”

“If you wish to kill me, I recommend making more than one hundred attacks in less than two seconds. And Superhuman Trainer, lend me your knowledge.”

Everything immediately changed.

Hafuri had only been escaping before, but that clearly changed. As they quickly moved together like acrobat planes, they lowered their hips, focused on shifting their body weight, and stepped forward. They charged into the center of those deadly claws and fangs, received not a single scratch, and thrust a large and small palm into the center of the Aoandon’s soft belly.

The blow sounded like a hit on a drum taller than she was.

The sounds of breaking tree trunks continued for a while as the Aoandon flew away like a shell.

“Many regions still tell of Youkai teaching humans the superhuman techniques of the gods: the Tengu that trained Ushiwakamaru, the Yamaba that trained Kintarou, and the fox that trained Abe no Seimei. Similarly, I now have superhuman combat techniques.”

The Aoandon rolled along in confusion and saw something as she got back up.

The sexy Hafuri held the hilt of a Japanese sword contained in a scabbard held out by one of her subordinates.

“Heirloom Transcender, perfect my weapon.”

As soon as the large Hafuri drew the sword, a repulsively beautiful shine filled it.

“It is a very common legend for paranormal power to fill a tool or animal after one hundred years. Akki Rasetsu and Udou Utsuki’s body double both struggled to create a specific technique out of it, but the answer was actually quite nearby.”

The Aoandon honestly thought that sword was dangerous. It had been a surprise attack with no advance knowledge of the situation, but that girl had outdone her empty-handed. Now that she had an artificially enhanced weapon, it was anyone’s guess who would win this.

Needless to say, chopping off her head or tearing out her heart would not be enough to kill the Aoandon.

But even if it did not kill her, being chopped into tiny little pieces would be very bad for her.

After all…

(I’m a paranormal being made up of one hundred different scary stories. If I’m broken into one hundred equal parts, I lose what makes me special. The stories will be separated and weakened. I doubt I would even retain my sense of self.)

There were examples of a powerful Youkai being broken up and sealed away. For example, the Yamanba being chopped up and sealed in forty-two mounds or the Tsuchigumo’s corpse being sliced in three and buried. There were exceptions like the Killing Stone containing the curse of a nine-tailed fox. When the stone was broken, the small fragments created a new type of Youkai known as the Kuda-Gitsune. Regardless, the Aoandon’s sense of self and very existence would be destroyed.

And…

“Did I forget to mention this?”

The small Hafuri spoke while the large Hafuri adjusted her grip on the sword.

“I have their assistance, so it would be foolish indeed to forget about their presence.”

“…”

The Aoandon slowly turned around.

Everything was already over as far as the eye could see.

One was the Illness Magic User.

The large man wore the black special combat uniform of a SWAT member and the magazine holders held curse charms. That walking strategic weapon used the power of the charms to transform his own hatred into Illness Magic and create an ever changing attack and defense based on all forms of germs and bacteria.

One was the Venom Clairvoyant.

The beautiful woman had long black hair and pale white skin. She wore a shrine maiden outfit with a thin coat held in place by a decorative clasp made of St John's wort. A red cloth was bound tightly to her face such that it covered her eyes. It was said insects would warn of coming danger and she gained a special power by raising such things inside her own body. Sticking from her sleeves were two old German handguns decorated with bells and string. She was the ultimate observation device that never hid behind cover and never looked down the sights of those guns as she danced in a circle and brought destruction to everything around her.

One was the Supernatural Trainer.

The gentleman wore glasses and a black butler’s uniform and he held a riding crop. He had the power to instantly teach every one of his targets superhuman combat techniques such as unbelievable strength or the ability to jump extreme distances. If he assisted an army, every single soldier would become a match for countless enemy soldiers. And of course, that special military advisor could make himself a target of that power.

One was the Passionate Predator.

The teenage girl wore a greenish-brown twelve-layered kimono. By gaining a phantom pregnancy with her target, she would gain a false bond with them. Then her immense jealousy and hatred would become a blazing curse that was sure to assassinate that target. She had broadly interpreted and twisted the negative emotions of a woman seen in legends such as Kiyohime. The more she loved them, the more the flames grew, so that precision guided weapon could burn down even the temples and shrines protected by buddhas and gods.

One was the Heirloom Transcender.

The dried-up old man in Japanese clothing sat in a worn-out old wheelchair with a large canopy covering his face. It could be a sword, a spear, a cat, a dog, or anything else. Anything he threw in his furnace, heated up, and diligently beat with his hammer would become part of the paranormal. The sword would become a spiritual sword capable of slaying countless foes and the cat would become a monster cat that could speak the human tongue. Without even needing to reference Suzuka Gozen, that paranormal weapon designer and developer could even create floating weapons that automatically cut down their targets to protect him.

Altogether, they were Hyakki Yakou's Top Five.

If used correctly, those ultimate trump cards could each conquer one of the five continents and hold the entire world in their hands.

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

They had already taken care of everything and stood in the center of the piles of corpses. Their eyes were directed straight at the Aoandon who had bared her fangs against their master.

It was not that the team the Aoandon had gathered was weak.

It had been a great army with strength in both quantity and quality.

It was just that the Top Five were even greater monsters who made defeating them look like plucking weeds from the ground.

(That just leaves Sachi-chan, the Oomukade, Saiki Kazu, the Byouki user, and a few more. Drat, that's mostly just the newcomers.)

The Aoandon honestly accepted the state of the battlefield.

Even after all of her preparations and all of the dominoes she had lined up, this was the result. A massive hand had blocked the way and the boring pre-established harmony had ruined everything.

(I was already about 50/50 with Perfect Mode Hafuri-chan, so this probably wouldn't end well if the Top Five began a saturation attack.)

"Heh heh."

"What's so funny?"

"Well, I'm the ally of everything who wants change, so this reliable victory of the pre-established harmony isn't very much fun."

"But it is reality."

"Oh? Is it really?"

She snapped her fingers and spoke to one of her few remaining allies.

"Okay, Saiki Kazu. *This didn't work after all, so let's get started.*"

Somewhere in Noukotsu Village, a young man in a dark suit spoke.

“Paranormal being imported by the Southern Barbarians, change your colors and grow scarlet. I desire a blood-red paranormal power, so take on that form.”

The word syncretism was most often used when referring to Japan’s form of Buddhism, but Buddhism had originated in India and crossed through China and Korea before arriving in Japan. And during that process, the names, forms, and roles of the buddhas and deities had changed.

The term Akuma was originally a Buddhist term. It was only later used to refer to Western devils and demons because the Japanese language lacked a more appropriate word.

So…

“Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier. Appear in the form we desire to grant what we desire to the extent we desire. …Appear, Tsuerika Nyorai. It is time to begin your work.”

An unimaginably sinister whirlwind blew through.

This paranormal being had been intentionally twisted.

This threat had been tuned to match someone’s needs.

Jinnai Shinobu saw it happen as he checked on Noukotsu Village with the Succubus.

Standing in the center of a tornado-like whirlwind was a white woman with a glamorous body and sky blue ribbons at the end of her long blonde hair. It was the Australian witch named Marguerite Steinhols. That assassin had once used the Furutsubaki (Small) in an attempt to get her hands on the Succubus.

But…

“That’s…not her.”

The Succubus sounded stunned.

For one, the woman’s clothing was different. This material kept all living creatures away with the hardness of rough gray concrete and yet it somewhat resembled reptilian scales. And that material was wrapped tightly around the beautiful woman’s seductive outline as if eating into her. It mercilessly showed off her cleavage, navel, and thighs, but that almost looked like a way of increasing the number of ports from which to eject her blasphemously ominous power.

And she was the same as the Succubus, which meant…

“That might be her body, but it isn’t her soul. Damn her! Did she borrow Margeurite’s body to appear in this world!?”

A moment later, two twisted horns burst from Margeurite’s forehead and flowed backwards. Bat-like wings came from her back and a long, thick tail came from near her butt. She became the stereotypical image of a demon seen in Western religious art and video games.

“Heh heh…”

With a seductive breath, she slowly embraced her own body…no, the body of the woman she had hijacked. She squeezed the large breasts and traced her fingertips along the smooth curves of her hips as if testing the size and movable range of this new body.

“Yes, yes. It’s been so long since I felt like this. I have once more violated a woman’s womb to be born into this world! I’ve lost count of how many times this is, though! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

青行灯（あおあんどん）が叫んだ直後だった。
その日。大悪魔（だいあくま）ツェリカが天に咆哮（ほうこう）し、少年の小さな世界は決壊（けっかい）した。

“Ah…”

She was a legendary-class archdemon.

She had overwhelming power but she had not quite ranked among the seven deadly sins.

She was easily on par with ridiculously well-known beings like Satan or Beelzebub.

She was from an entirely different dimension than Youkai or spirits.

That monster might even surpass a low- or mid-ranked god in a polytheistic religion.

Or perhaps she could call herself a demon lord.

“Ahhh…ahhhh….”

Jinnai Shinobu stood stock still.

The fate of the village had just crossed a certain line. He was hopelessly certain of it.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Welcome to the world of those who wish for change.”

The Aoandon grinned.

She showed no concern for the Top Five or the two Hafuris who had shown such abnormal power. Emotion filled her face, she spread her arms as if to embrace her enemy, and she made an announcement.

“This is a world with no pre-established harmony! A world of never-ending chaos filled with such great possibility! Now, let us fight to the death as the ultimate form of entertainment! Let’s cheer everyone up!! The people of this country are being crushed by oppressive boredom, *so let’s show them something that they’ll think was worth dying to see*!!”

As soon as the Aoandon finished shouting, Archdemon Tselika roared toward the heavens and a certain boy’s small world was destroyed.

Afterword

Volume 6!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This series is always a battle against the ballooning page numbers, but it finally got so thick it had to be split in two. I hope the content is strong enough to warrant that thickness, but I'll leave that judgment up to all of you.

My goal this time was to see how intense of a battle I could write while sticking to the Intellectual Village style, so you might have seen some scenes that felt a little different from normal.

About Chapter 1.

It looks like it's going to be a pretty standard case of solving the Package's mystery, but then an unexpected supernatural battle breaks out between elementary school kids. I had always planned for Yonesaki Hiro's home to be an antique shop filled with object-related Youkai, but I didn't manage to put it in Volume 2. I was glad I got to show it here in a big way.

A boy wanting to put his life on the line for the girl he's fallen for is something that only works in fiction, but I think it's boys of that age that long for that kind of thing the most. An impure adult would never be able to say they wouldn't lose because their feelings for the girl were stronger than anyone else's.

The best point of this chapter was impure Jinnai Shinobu's sleazy school life and his nervous homeroom teacher who was forced to wear bloomers in class with a dead look in her eyes.

About Chapter 2.

Neko Manma comes from my own preferences. I like the dish, but it unfortunately isn't popular enough to have a chain of restaurants in the real world. Coming up with these fictional services and best sellers is one of my favorite parts of Intellectual Village.

As a police officer, Uchimaku Hayabusa doesn't need a setup to be involved in a murder. He doesn't need a landslide on a rainy day blocking the road and trapping him in the mansion where the murder happens. He's sent out to the scene of the crime, which is convenient for writing the start of the story.

But unlike with Shinobu or Mai, he is required to help people equally and evenly. To emphasize that this time, I had him rescuing some old folks living in illegal apartments. Yes, the exact opposite of a cute girl. After being abandoned by everyone, the old people had given up on their own lives, but Hayabusa still naturally wanted to save them. I hope you enjoyed seeing that stance of his.

I love writing the stupid conversations between Uchimaku and Sotobori because I can just empty my head. And while Hachikawa Tomoe showed up in those conversations, her embarrassment isn't from pure love. It's more from a sense of seeing her father in Uchimaku. Hmm, that might actually make it as troublesome as Sotobori was saying.

The villain's name was Yamame, which is a type of Youkai. A Yamame is a beautiful version of a Yamanba, but while the Yamanba does good and bad things, the Yamame attacks and kills people 100% of the time.

About Chapter 3.

The more silent someone is, the more of a romantic they are on the inside. …Well, that's one of the basics of character creation. Shoving money in a donation box, rescuing the family in the restaurant, or otherwise helping out people who have nothing to do with the case while still going on a rampage is another one of the basics.

I made this all about the Illness Magic User so you could enjoy his transcendent battles. This may have been the closest to what you all think of when you hear of a "Kamachi Kazuma story". And after seeing this, I think you'll see why Hishigami Mai knows she could never get along with him. Mai likes to humor people, raise them up before dropping them, betray them, fill them with doubt, and otherwise eliminate the enemy forces before the battle even begins, but that would never work with a samurai character who charges straight in regardless of the situation.

At the same time, this is the guy who bared his fangs against Hyakki Yakou's leader and slaughtered the civilian hotel workers in Volume 1. It might be fun to imagine just how cornered he had to have felt leading up to that.

The secret protagonist if this chapter was the Oomukade. I also made him quite the romantic. I've written several characters willing to risk their life for their friend, but was I being too innovative when I had him willing to let that friend eat his organs?

For the Aoandon, I originally thought an oni girl should have two horns because it's cute, but I ended up going with a single horn for a number of reasons. But since she used that hypnotic phosphorescence to deceive Ranzono Sachi, I can see now that a single horn really was the only option.

Saiki Kazu has grown a lot more aggressive since his composed appearance in Volume 4, but you should be able to tell why if you see how Ranzono Sachi was acting in this chapter. When he was recruited, she seemed to be acting kindly, but she was actually saying things that tore into his heart.

About Chapter 4.

This was Uchimaku Hayabusa's great escape through Tokyo. In reality, hijacking the TV or internet to provoke a criminal will get you thrown in jail regardless of any other crimes (just like sting operations aren't allowed, getting a criminal to commit a crime is illegal), but this is fiction!

PSI_ver_RAIN is an idol born from a different approach than Tarot Girls 22. Video sites, PVs, and downloaded broadcasts. To be honest, I don't know all that much

about this new movement putting pressure on the TV industry, but that's why it all seems so amazing and why I wanted to put plenty of that strange new world in here.

But the real important part wasn't Uchimaku himself. It was Shinobu and the others watching through the TV. They were content to cheer on their uncle since it was just something on TV, but in the very end…well, I don't have to explain it all to you.

And as I was writing Tsumada Mio, she left my original expectations and went on a bit of rampage. That really surprised me. And she even rubbed Hayabusa's head. She didn't show up for very long, but I feel like she stole the show away from PSI_ver_RAIN. …Ahh, I want to make her a regular character.

Next time will be the beginning of the head-on war between Hyakki Yakou's Top Five and the Aandon, Archdemon Tselika, Saiki Kazu, and the rest. The connections with Ranzono Sachi and the Byouki user will come into play too. What will happen to the Hishigami Sisters, Uchimaku Hayabusa, and Sotobori who has a surprising connection to Saiki? And with his small world destroyed by those adults, what will the boy named Jinnai Shinobu protect, what will he choose, and what can he do? I hope you're looking forward to it.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. A single centipede is bad enough, but there was a whole bunch of them. There was also the gathering of the Top Five, Archdemon Tselika's true appearance, and plenty of other difficult things. I am truly thankful that you all have stuck with me instead of just giving up.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I think this volume had a lot of physical battles but also a lot of psychological conflict. What did you think of it? This series has gotten a lot of characters now too, so the different lines of interest and emotion have grown pretty complex. Still, I hope you will stick with me.

And I will end this here.

I think the manliest one of all was the Oomukade.

-Kamachi Kazuma